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DISSONANCE AS METHOD IN THE PLAYS OF EDWARD ALBEE

by

(C) REBECCA LOUISE SMITH

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled ...Edward Albee: .....Playwright of Protest and Paradox. Revised to .....Dissonance as Method in the Plays of Edward Albee. submitted by ....Rebecca Louise Smith in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary American playwright Edward Albee attempts throughout his nine major plays--The Zoo Story, The Sandbox, The Death of Bessie Smith, The American Dream, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Tiny Alice, A Delicate Balance, Box-Mao-Box, and All Over--to effect changes, or at least a heightened sense of awareness, in the artistic, social, and moral consciousness of modern Western, and specifically American, society. All aspects of his drama, including his skillful use of a wide variety of theatrical elements and effects and his methods of characterization, dialogue development, and theme development, work toward that end.

The plays work to effect these changes by creating dissonance in the mind of the audience member or reader. The dissonance results from Albee's deliberate use and manipulation of the audience member's expectations and conditioned responses. Through the setting, characterization, language, and theme development, Albee may initially lead his audience to expect predictable dramaturgic elements. However, he may then develop plots, use dialogue, create characters, emphasize ideas, and arrive at conclusions quite unlike those expected. Obviously, Albee's unpredictable use of conventional elements of drama parallels the unpreditability of his hypotheses and conclusions when considering conventional subject matter and traditional themes. In all these instances, the intended result is the same. The lack of fulfillment of one's expectations leads to the creation of dissonance in the mind of the audience member.

Dissonance is defined as any lack of harmony and agreement in one's perceptions that produces feelings of unease or tension. It is possible that the strong desire for reduction or resolution of the dissonance may stimulate the audience member to closer examination and evaluation of the disparate, seemingly incongruous elements of the plays and to introspection. Possibly, the analysis and introspection may then lead to the restructuring of one's perceptions and ideas, which is the first and most important step towards personal change or towards heightened awareness.

Analyses of four of the major aspects of Albee's plays--the use of theatrical elements and his characterization, language, and thematic concerns--reveal the organic unity of the whole body of Albee's dramatic work. Through the patterns that can be traced throughout his work, one sees that his plays consistently work to compel modern man to commit himself to the perception and acceptance of reality, to a defense of his own humanity, and to attainment of honest and compassionate interaction with other people, even though great personal sacrifices may be required and even though success is not assured. The final effect of the audience member's or reader's examination of the complex, multi-leveled, contrapuntal stimuli that comprise all the plays is his awareness of Albee's recurrent method--the creation of dissonance--and Albee's recurrent theme: Through a deliberate, conscious choice of action and involvement, man can face the absurdity of a "senseless world that makes no sense" and can create a life that has meaning. The plays do not advocate despair. Instead, they suggest that solutions should be sought while there is still time and that an affirmative response to life is in order.

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Introduction

> A playwright--unless he is creating escapist romances (an honorable occupation, of course)--has two obligations: first, to make some statement about the condition of "man" (as it is put) and, second, to make some statement about the nature of the art form with which he is working. In both instances he must attempt change. In the first instance--since very few serious plays are written to glorify the status quo--the playwright must try to alter his society; in the second instance--since art must move, or wither--the playwright must try to alter the forms within which his precursors have had to work.[1]

The contemporary American playwright Edward Albee does attempt throughout his nine major plays--The Zoo Story, The Sandbox, The Death of Bessie Smith, The American Dream, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Tiny Alice, A Delicate Balalnce, Box-Mao-Box, and All Over--to effect changes, or at least to effect a heightened sense of awareness, in the artistic, social and moral consciousness of modern Western, and specifically American, society. All aspects of his drama, including his skillful use of a wide variety of theatrical elements and effects and his methods of characterization, dialogue development, and theme development, work to create dissonance in the mind of the audience. And this dissonance further works to accomplish Albee's goal of effecting change.

Since his emergence in 1959 with the first production of The Zoo Story, Edward Albee has come to be considered by many critics as the most important of the many new, young American playwrights who began writing early in the decade of the sixties. For example, Gerald Weales

asserts in The Jumping-Off Place: American Drama in the 1960's that "Edward Albee is inescapably the American playwright of the 1960's."[2] Comparably, in his discussion of the New York theatre, Mel Gussow makes the following evaluation of Albee's position:

> Condemned by some and worshiped by others, Edward Albee is clearly the most compelling American playwright to explode upon the Broadway stage since Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller in the mid-'40s.[3]

Indeed, Albee has gained an international reputation based on his nine major plays and three adaptations, with successful productions of his works in Germany, England, Japan, Sweden, and many other countries. These plays, written over a period of twelve years, compare in variety of experimentation with the work of O'Neill. Also like O'Neill, Odets, Miller, Williams, and other playwrights before him, Albee is a perceptive--but not dogmatically committed -social critic. In the tradition of these other modern American dramatists, Albee has refused to see his function as a playwright to be that of implicitly defending and preserving the traditional beliefs and values of American society by leaving these beliefs and value systems unexamined or unattacked. He appears to reject the concept of the theatre as "a place to relax and have a good time,"[4] a concept that has been perpetuated by what Gussow calls "the typical Broadway season nowadays," consisting of "a dozen splashy musicals, a few frothy comedies, [and] a handful of hits from Europe . . . ."[5] Albee repeatedly states his opposition--in interviews, articles, prefaces and introductions--and demonstrates his opposition--in the plays that he writes--to what he considers to be Broadway's persistent function of pandering to "the public need for self-congratulation and reassurance and presen[ing]

a false picture of ourselves to ourselves . . . ."[6] Instead, as Martin Esslin states in The Theatre of the Absurd, Albee "attacks the very foundations of American optimism" and points out the "unwillingness to face the ultimate facts of the human condition that in America, even more than in Europe, represents the essence of bourgeois assumptions and attitudes."[7] Although his interpretation of Albee's work is quite unlike that of Esslin in many other ways, C. W. E. Bigsby makes much the same observation about the effects of Albee's works:

> Chekhov once pointed out that it is as profitable for a farmer to breed rats in a granary as it is for bourgeois society to nourish the artist--a thought which has no doubt occurred, in recent years, to those at the Valley Forge Military Academy who had sent Albee forth to "preserve America."[8]

Indeed, Albee's plays do seem to embody the concept of "change"--in terms of artistic experimentation and flexibility as well as social analysis and evaluation--rather than "preservation." Albee's adherence to the concept of artistic change is implicit in the varying structures of his plays; each differs from the others in many ways. And each of the diverse dramatic styles is specifically chosen because it best fulfills the organic demands of a particular play. The possible social changes, arising out of changes in an individual's perception and level of awareness and in man's relationship to the world around him, are to result from the audience member's reactions to the total effect created by the plays. A direct visceral response is immediately elicited in the audience member by Albee's dramatization of a multi-faceted condition or a complex, problematic state of mind. However, the audience member's perception of the more general "meaning" of the plays may be much less immediate because one must react more gradually to the polyphonic, contrapuntal effect which results from Albee's

skillful method of employing the available theatrical effects, of developing characters, and of creating dialogue.

For example, in many instances Albee begins his plays by employing apparently conventional theatrical settings, situations, characters, devices, and genres in order to set them into a disarmingly familiar framework for the audience member. Therefore, to some audience members and critics, Albee's plays appear to fit into predictable, traditional categories of American theatre such as social comedy, social protest drama, naturalism, realism, and expressionistic satire, or into the newer category of the Theatre of the Absurd. He may even use techniques that are generally associated with one or another of the more influential modern dramatists. But mere pastiche is not the result. Indeed closer examination reveals that the deliberate resemblances are merely superficial; the conventional categories and dramatic techniques are treated by Albee with impressionistic flexibility and allusiveness. In fact, what Albee is doing in many of his plays is deliberately eliciting, using, and manipulating the audience's conditioned responses to the attributes of popular drama. He may lead one, initially, to expect certain predictable elements and then develop plots, use dialogue, create characters, emphasize ideas, and arrive at conclusions quite unlike those expected. Furthermore, he may use the various associations that he elicits to add ironic depth to his own drama. As Anne Paolucci states in From Tension to Tonic: The Plays of Edward Albee, Albee "does not discard such [dramatic] conventions altogether, but restructures them according to the organic demands of his dramatic themes."[9] Therefore, one sees that there is a particular aptness to Geri Trotta's assertion that the effect of Edward Albee's plays--in which one's initial expectations

are not fulfilled, in which incongruity is skillfully used as a dramaturgical method, and in which the expected and the unexpected, the familiar and the bizarre exist side by side--is "rather like finding a live tarantula at the bottom of a box of Cracker Jack."[10]

Parodies and paradoxes exist on every level of Albee's dramatic work. The action that occurs in his relatively conventional settings seems slightly incongruous and therefore disquieting. Albee's plays provide no one-dimensional heroes or villains. Language is used by the characters in Albee's plays to lie, to confuse, to hide, and to cause pain, but it is rarely used to effect honest, spontaneous, positive contact with other characters. Because he follows the logic of his plays to the most plausible resolution of the conflict and the action, there can be no unambiguously happy conclusions, no pacifying and reassuring denouements. The final meaning of each of Albee's plays can be understood only when the "teaching emotion"--explained by the character Jerry in The Zoo Story, Albee's first play--is created:

> [. . .][11] neither kindness nor cruelty by themselves, independent of each other, creates any effect beyond themselves; [. . . but] the two combined, together, at the same time, are the teaching emotion. (ZS, pp. 35-36)

Thus, Albee attempts to articulate his artistic and thematic concerns to the audience through an incongruous combination of, and an alternation between, kindness and cruelty. In fact, his total dramatic method ultimately can be seen as a kind of dialectic, that is, an alternation between delight and disturbance, the traditional and the unexpected, the humor of grimace and unmitigated seriousness, the preposterous and the horrifying, the obvious and the ambiguous or mysterious, and between existential awareness and immediate social concern. As Paolucci explains,

in the plays there is an "ever more intense oscillation between what is and what appears to be; between acknowledged purpose and hidden intentions; between the outer shell of life and the living truth which resists all facts."[12]

Obviously, Albee intentionally creates contrasts, paradoxes, and incongruities in every aspect of his drama. The audience member may leave the theatre with his expectations unfulfilled about the results of the action, about the ability of language to establish effective bonds of contact and communication between people, about the ways in which certain ostensibly stereotyped characters should react, about the "right" ending for the play, and so on. This deliberate unfulfillment of one's expectations in so many areas may result in a state of dissonance for the individual. Dissonance is quite generally defined as any lack of harmony and agreement in one's perceptions which thereby produces feelings of unease, tension, or frustration. The psychologist William Watts, in an article entitled "Predictability and Pleasure: Reactions to the Disconfirmation of Expectancies," gives a more precise analysis of the causes and effects of dissonance:

> . . . if an individual expects a certain event to occur and it does not, he will experience dissonance since his cognition that he expects the event to occur is inconsistent with his knowledge that the event did not occur. Because dissonance is presumably an unpleasant psychological state, disconfirmations should result in negative effect and, therefore, [should] be avoided when possible; or, if disconfirmations do occur, should lead to a cognitive restructuring on the part of the person so as to maximize consonant elements [that is, to attempt to restore a state of psychological consistency or equilibrium].[13]

Once dissonance is created, there are several possible methods of "cognitive restructuring" which lead to dissonance-reduction. These methods can be grouped into "three broad categories: 'stopping

thinking,' changing one element of the two that are in the dissonant relationship, and restructuring."[14] According to Hardyck and Kardush in their article on methods of dissonance-reduction, the first method--that is, passively forgetting about the incongruity and tension or actively supressing it--is preferred by some people because this method requires the least effort, introduces no new dissonance, and involves little mental work. The second method--which involves "opinion change, rejection of the source of a communication, denial of responsibility for one's behavior, and distortion of the content of dissonance-producing messages"[15]--may introduce new dissonance into the system and does require cognitive work. The third method, which essentially means that a person must increase the complexity and depth of his information, perceptions, and opinions concerning the two cognitions, may be avoided as long as possible by many people because of the elaborate cognitive processes involved:

> Seeking new consonant cognitions . . . may easily result in introducing new dissonance, and it requires a good deal of thinking, reading, and talking. Making new connections, seeing new complexities, etc., all involve work . . . and, again, the making of such new connections may introduce further dissonance.[16]

Throughout his nine major plays, Albee skillfully and effectively attempts to create psychological dissonance in his audience by his use of theatrical elements and his dialogue, characterization, and thematic development. Therefore, one may accurately discuss dissonance as method in all Albee's plays. However, the creation of dissonance need not necessarily be seen as an end in itself. As Watts, Hardyck, Kardush, and other psychologists assert, the creation of psychological disequilibrium automatically leads to one of several methods of

dissonance-reduction. Since Albee frequently has asserted that he hopes to stimulate various kinds of positive changes through his drama, one must assume that "stopping thinking" is not the reduction-method that he would hope eventually to stimulate in his audience--although it undoubtedly is a quite possible and quite frequent reaction to psychological tension and a sense of incongruity. The creation of dissonance may also lead one to thought and the resultant restructuring of perceptions, opinions, and beliefs. The fact that this "restructuring" may result is the more likely explanation for Albee's persistent use of one method, that is, dissonance-creation, in all areas of his drama. Michael Rutenberg substantiates this view as he describes the effect on the audience member of Albee's play Box-Mao-Box in words that apply with nearly equal force and validity to all the playwright's work:

> By creating dissonance, the play forces the spectator to reduce the psychological imbalance either by rejecting the play outright as meaningless, repressing it out of consciousness [that is, stopping thinking] or if he feels that the play has merit, by attempting to discover for himself its final pattern. He does this by reviewing the data assimilated during the theatrical experience [that is, restructuring]. Impelled by a disquieting sense of unfulfillment, he examines and re-examines the experience--only now he can choose to analyze the dramaturgical elements one at a time, shifting and interpolating them until a clear, understandable pattern emerges.[17]

From The Zoo Story to All Over, in order to perceive and understand Albee's plays one must attempt to see and hear all the diverse, interlocking, incongruous elements of the plays as a whole--not only as sequential elements which further the linear progression of a realistic narrative. The third method of dissonance-reduction, introspection

leading to restructuring, doubtlessly is the desired result of one's awareness of the complex, contrapuntal, verbal and visual stimuli that comprise Albee's plays. Albee's use of dissonance as method--which leads to tension, which further leads to a delayed solution--does not mean that the plays are aesthetically incomplete. The theatrical experience of each play is complete, constituting a complexly interwoven and unified whole. However, the plays also work to attempt to force the audience into a form of emotional and intellectual participation in and reaction to the plays that is active and engrossing and, therefore, may be more lasting in impact.

The meaning of each of Albee's nine plays that will be examined--The Zoo Story, The Sandbox, The Death of Bessie Smith, The American Dream, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Tiny Alice, A Delicate Balance, Box-Mao-Box, and All Over--must be pieced together by the audience outside the theatre situation in order to relieve the multiple levels of dissonance created by the plays. It is always possible that the audience member will think no further than the rationalization necessary to neutralize the psychological discomfort of dissonance. He may even cultivate a slightly "decadent" taste for dissonance as an exotic psychic sensation to be enjoyed within the safe confines of the theatrical experience. But it is also possible that the discomfort will provoke genuine personal introspection and cognitive restructuring--the essential first steps in any

degree of achievement of Albee's repeatedly asserted goal of changing or enlarging the artistic, social, and moral consciousness of individual human beings and, ultimately, possibly even American society.

Chapter One: Theatrical Elements

In the book From Tension to Tonic: The Plays of Edward Albee, Anne Paolucci states that Albee, like the greatest modern dramatists before him, "has discovered that the stage itself must be made articulate, often as a contrast against which the spoken word derives its meaning."[1] Of course, the stage setting, the most immediately obvious part of a play, can create a strong visual statement that complements and adds depth to the characterization, language, action, and thematic concerns of a play through the playwright's skillful use of properties, lighting, music, sounds, stage groupings, and so on. Edward Albee uses and manipulates all the aspects of staging in his continuing attempt to stimulate a strong personal response in the theatre audience member which will result in increased perception and self-awareness.

In the same way that he uses the traits of a particular traditional genre, such as social protest drama, expressionistic satire, or social comedy, merely as a point of departure and then creates dissonance by emphasizing themes, developing characters, and arriving at conclusions counter to those usually found in the particular genre, so Albee also creates dissonance through his manipulation of all the elements of the theatre. For example, the unremarkable settings for some of Albee's plays--a park bench on a sunny, Sunday afternoon, a hospital admissions room, an opulent castle, and well-furnished sitting rooms in the homes

of the wealthy--may elicit rather immediate and involuntary expectations on the part of the audience member. In nearly all cases, the settings for Albee's plays are not particularly unusual, but what immediately begins to happen in these seemingly typical settings is. The settings quickly lose their one-dimensional, realistic effect as the symbolic nature of the plays becomes apparent; and, almost as quickly, the audience member begins to perceive that his expectations for the plays will not be straightforwardly fulfilled.

The setting for each of Albee's plays is a quite limited area: the space surrounding a bench, a child's sandbox, or a desk; one room in a house; the deck of a ship; or the confines of a box. In each instance, the enclosed space of the set adds further to the building tension of the words and action of the play; Albee shows in every way possible that his characters inhabit "enclosed worlds"[2] on both physical and metaphysical levels. The characters in Albee's plays are entrapped, it appears, in rooms, boxes, and "cages" with walls and bars that they themselves create and perpetuate by their passivity, fear, guilt, and hatred.

Albee's first two plays are set outdoors, in a park and on the seashore, immediately suggesting space and freedom; however, one soon discovers that the characters in the plays carry with them wherever they go their own barriers which continue both to entrap the individual human beings and to separate them from each other. In Albee's first play, The Zoo Story, the setting for the complex, symbolic confrontation between the two characters Peter and Jerry is a specific place (Central Park in New York City), at a specific time (a Sunday afternoon in summer during the mid-twentieth century); but the setting is, at the same

time, quite universalized. On stage, there are only two park benches, "foliage, trees, [and] sky." (ZS, p.11) This simple, natural, universalized setting creates a neutral environment for the meeting between Jerry and Peter. The park is the common ground that both separates and connects the wealthy, fashionable east side of New York City where Peter lives and the run-down, brownstone tenements of the west side where Jerry lives.

The wood and iron park bench on which Peter sits at the center of the stage increases in significance as the audience gradually becomes more aware of its importance in Peter's life; the bench is, on one level, a symbol of Peter's acquisitiveness. He seems to own or possess the bench in the same way that he possesses a proper family. But more importantly, the bench is the symbol of his conscious withdrawal from contact with other people and from life. Peter says, "I sit on this bench almost every Sunday afternoon [. . .] . It's secluded here; there's never anyone sitting here so I have it all to myself." (ZS, p.41) This bench becomes the symbolic trophy in the conflict between Peter and Jerry. Peter insists that he has a right to the bench, that is, to withdrawal and passivity. Jerry refuses to accept Peter's avowed right to abdication. He forces Peter to "fight for it, then. Defend yourself; defend your bench." (ZS, p.45) The battle results in Peter's dispossession, but Jerry sits alone on the bench only as he is dying:

> With the knife in him, he stumbles back to the bench that PETER had vacated. He crumbles there, sitting, facing PETER, his eyes wide in agony, his mouth open. [. . .] JERRY is dying. (ZS, p.47)

Comparable in stage effectiveness to Beckett's use of a tape recorder or a pair of boots and to Ionesco's use of empty chairs or a growing

corpse, the use of this bench in The Zoo Story is the beginning of Albee's skillful and effective use of stage props as dramatic script.

The action of Albee's second short work, The Sandbox, also takes place in nature, at the seashore, which is represented by a stage property that becomes a strong visual symbol--a child's sandbox, into which Grandma is summarily dumped by her daughter and son-in-law, Mommy and Daddy. In his stage directions for this play, Albee calls for a bare stage, with a few simple chairs, a music stand, and the sandbox. The background for the action consists only of "the sky, which alters from brightest day to deepest night" (SB, p.8), in a very artificial and obvious way. The wings, wiring, and lighting apparatus are visible in the set for The Sandbox. The visibility of this usually unseen stage equipment and the absence of the usual stage properties destroy the illusions of reality and localization that generally are sought. Furthermore, the characters continue this destruction of the illusion of reality as they give directions to the stagehands and the musician, comment on the lighting and sound effects, and frequently address their obvious "lines" directly to the audience. The soft music provided by an on-stage musician, the arrival of the "long night" (requested by Grandma from the stagehand in charge of lighting), and the three off-stage rumbles (" [. . .] and you know what that means," says Mommy perceptively) are obvious attempts by Albee to ridicule and transcend the illusions of the traditional theatre, to point out the formalized, theatrical clichés of death, to prevent the usual kind of identification with characters, and, thus, to stimulate stronger, more personal reactions from audience members. All these techniques draw the audience members into the on-stage action in a way that is individually involving.

Through a deliberate intensification of aesthetic distance, Albee rejects the theatrical illusion of realism and prevents the usual identification of audience members with the characters. Like Pirandello in his attack on the conventions of the theatre which obscure the reality of life behind empty rhetoric and forms, Albee stresses the artificial theatricality of every aspect of his play The Sandbox. In The Sandbox, this results in a play in which form and content are integrally linked, because, as C. W. E. Bigsby explains, in Albee's examination and rejection of the institutions, traditions, and values of an "effete society," represented by Mommy and Daddy, he also rejects "a theatre which caters for it by enshrining its distorted values into art":

> When [Albee] deliberately stresses the theatricality of his play, he does so not in order to achieve a sense of clinical objectivity, but in order to expose the clichés of the theatre as he had those of society itself.[3]

The tiny child's sandbox is an ironic symbol for the seashore; and, ironically, the seashore, which is the place that is the symbol for the beginnings of life, becomes Grandma's burial ground, just as the park does for Jerry in The Zoo Story. Albee's scenes in which a natural setting is important of course call to mind other plays in which a setting in nature is important, usually as a symbol of freedom and vitality. For example, in Shakespeare's plays, a forest setting becomes a "green world" of limitless possibilities, where characters achieve insight, love, and harmony that is unattainable in their routine, urban settings. In both Albee's and Shakespeare's plays, when men are in nature, away from their accustomed environmental and social props, interaction becomes more elemental and more nearly equal. Each character must rely on that part of himself that has existence and meaning

independent of any artifical, temporal, social impositions. However, the results of the interaction between Albee's characters are quite dissimilar to the happy endings that transpire in the Athenian Wood or in Arden Forest. In Albee's plays, as Jerry and Grandma demonstrate, dissonance, disharmony, and death are the results of interaction among human beings, even in nature.

Death and destruction also are the unexpected results in Albee's play The Death of Bessie Smith. The main setting for this play is a small, semi-private hospital. However, within the walls of this hospital, cruelty is the main mode of behavior, and increased pain is the most frequent product of interactions among characters. Since this seemingly constitutes a direct inversion of the intent and workings of a real hospital, the words and action that occur in this setting seem all the more disturbing and pointed. Although the historical events on which The Death of Bessie Smith is based occurred "in and around the city of Memphis, Tennessee," (BS, p.24) in the fall of 1937, the stage setting for this play again works against specific geographical or chronological localization and limitation. The hospital is to be seen as a microcosm of the entire world outside. The stage remains relatively bare throughout the play, with only a desk, a chair, ramps, and a few other basic props visible. There is "very little more" (BS, p.25) on stage that would delimit the play's broader applicability. The office chair and desk, ubiquitous in modern institutions, emphasize the pervasive bureaucracy and inflexibility of these man-made organizations. The person who sits behind the central, front desk, the admissions desk, ironically functions as a barrier separating one human being from another with whom he desires or needs to make contact.

The specific admissions desk that is the center of the action in The Death of Bessie Smith is in an urban hospital. Seated behind this desk is the character the Nurse. Another very similar desk, with a very similar nurse behind it, located at Mercy Hospital, also is briefly shown. As the action of the play develops, the irony of that name, of the settings, and of the multi-leveled applicability of the adjectives "white" and "sterile" increases. The Nurse never leaves her admitting desk, her hiding place comparable to Peter's bench. She asserts that she is thus "doing her job," even though the desk cuts her off from contact with people in need and from fulfilling the services that one would consider to be the essence of nursing. The Nurse and her hospital clearly point up the distorted values that pervade modern society; in this hospital as in the rest of society, doing good has given way to more expedient acts. Showing mercy and alleviating pain are much less important than the appeasement of those with power and prestige:

> NURSE: Now it's true that the poor man lying up there with his guts coming out could be a nigger for all the attention he'd get if His Honor should start shouting for something . . . he could be on the operating table . . . and they'd drop his insides right on the floor and come running if the mayor should want his cigar lit. . . . But that is the way things are. Those are facts. (BS, p.41)

The other characters are drawn to the desk, like moths to a flame, although they invariably are made to suffer by the Nurse. They are tied to her frustration, dissatisfaction, pain, and hatred by their own guilt, socially induced fears, and self-disgust.

In fact, nearly every character in the play is so thoroughly permeated with boredom, bigotry, neurotic fears and hatreds, and illusions that he has become nearly ineffectual. Only Bessie Smith--who is never seen or heard throughout the play and who has, by the time the play is

set, herself become drunken and defeated--seems ever to have been a strong, self-sufficient human being. But she never comes on stage. However, by the interjection of brief scenes in which Jack, Bessie's manager and consort, merely mentions her name, her presence is made to pervade the entire play. The implicit vitality of her past is juxtaposed to the present sterile situation in which her death is shown to be a result of the social, personal, and metaphysical wasteland that must inevitably follow a rejection of human compassion and a capitulation to cynicism.

The play The Death of Bessie Smith thus provides an object lesson in multi-leveled destruction. The physical arrangement of the stage adds emphasis to this idea; the action of the play takes place at the "central front area of the stage" and at various locations on multi-leveled ramps which flank the central acting area. The scenes enacted on the various levels of the stage show varying kinds of destruction, including self-destruction: the destruction of illusions about oneself and the future, the destruction of dreams and hopes, and the destruction of the potential for meaningful human contact within families, between friends, in sexual relationships, and between members of different races. Thus, this open, non-realistic set allows for the scenically effective juxtaposition and interaction of Scene Five, in which the action takes place simultaneously in three different places: on the front central acting area around the admissions desk, at one location on the raised ramp, and off-stage. The Nurse at the admissions desk telephones a second nurse at Mercy Hospital, which is represented by a second admissions desk located on a raised platform behind the central area of action. The two women listlessly gossip, their emptiness and

boredom unmitigated. In the middle of this short scene, which is located at the mid-point of the play itself, the music comes up, and the voice of Jack is heard off-stage, reassuring Bessie of her upcoming success. His cry of warning follows, then the sound of an automobile crash, then silence. The "very bored" good-byes of the two nurses conclude this scene which, through its pointed and ironic juxtaposition, epitomizes the extent of the dehumanization of man that is possible. On each of the three levels of visible or unseen action, one or more kinds of human destruction have taken place.

In this symbolic stage setting--microcosmic, ironic, multi-leveled, and impersonal--music and lighting take on more importance as they are used by Albee to reflect the diverse, strong emotional states that comprise the tone of the play. Jazz music is heard whenever the scenes involving Bessie Smith occur, emphasizing her function as a symbol of the contrast between human potential and its negligible realization. The lighting also is highly evocative. It is used by Albee to make visual comments on the characters and the action, sometimes sympathetic and sometimes ironic: "[T]he whole back wall of the stage is full of the sky, which will vary from scene to scene: a hot blue; a sunset; a great, red-orange-yellow sunset. Sometimes full, sometimes but a hint." (BS, p.25) Throughout the play, the stage directions call for lighting effects that represent sky-color changes. These changes are meant by Albee to represent the reaction of nature, a force unbound by man's artificial, destructive, self-imposed attitudes and beliefs, to the actions of men in their personal lives and in their social structures. At the end of the play, "the great sunset blazes" (BS, p.80), an ambiguous, almost paradoxical symbol suggesting not only decline, decay, and apocalypse but also the new day that will inevitably follow, suggesting not only the flames of

destruction but also the heat of passionate involvement and action. The incongruities and ambiguities that characterize the ending of this somewhat expressionistic play are intentional, one suspects. The play ends, but the dramatic conflicts are not conclusively resolved. Thus, one must continue to think about the play, seeking a resolution within his own mind and life, outside the theatre situation.

This same lack of conclusive resolutions also characterizes Albee's plays which are set in the well-decorated sitting rooms of wealthy and well-established people. The action in such seemingly diverse plays as The American Dream, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, A Delicate Balance, and All Over takes place entirely in one room, in enclosed, microcosmic worlds. When discussing the setting he had visualized for Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Albee stated that he had meant for the room to suggest "the image of a womb or a cave, some confinement."[4] This image applies with equal accuracy to the three other plays as well, in which the characters seek to escape into bland conformity and mindless, irresponsible security--that is, a return to the womb-- or to escape into a life based on unexamined assumptions and stereotypes and on carefully nurtured illusions--that is, a return to the cave and the shadows on the wall. The characters who inhabit these rooms are members of the archetypal family unit, a compression of American society's values, problems, and aspirations. In these families, however, all relationships that should be based on love and trust are held together by greed, insecurity, hate, guilt, habit, and inertia. Thus, in each of these plays--mitigated by decreasing amounts of black humor--shallowness, boredom, stagnation, fear, and entrapment combine to create the pervasive tone. In Eugene O'Neill's play All God's Chillun' Got Wings, the walls

of the set actually were supposed to move in on the characters within the one room in which most of the action took place, emphasizing visually the idea of the increasing emotional confinement of the characters. It is unnecessary for the walls of the rooms in Albee's plays actually to be moved inward; his skill in creating the sense of confinement and suffocation through dialogue, action, and tone suffices.

The confining living rooms of Albee's families suggest normalcy, but normalcy is askew in each instance. Rooms off-stage disappear when Mommy and Daddy attempt to find them in The American Dream. When the news is related that Grandma has been taken away by the Van Man, the lights in the room melodramatically "dim a little suddenly." (AD, p.122) By stepping outside the set, Grandma moves to another level of stage reality and becomes a commentator on the action of the characters who remain within the room. In A Delicate Balance, characters try to hide from an unnamable "terror" in the opulence of the home where the action is centered. Harry and Edna come to the home of their friends in search of "the room," the special place "with a night light, or the door ajar so you can look down the hall from the bed and see that Mommy's door is open." (DB, p.99) George welcomes his guests in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? to "your heart's content--Illyria . . . Penguin Island . . . Gomorrah," (VW, p.40) suggesting the confusion, illusions, and destruction that lie just beneath the surface of the seemingly typical "living room of a house on the campus of a small New England college." The college is located in New Carthage, suggesting the city of Carthage described by St. Augustine as a "cauldron of unholy loves"[5] in which the false material values that brought its material success also were responsible for its eventual physical and moral downfall. In the

Confessions, one sees that "not only lust, but play-acting and illusion are central to Augustine's experiences in Carthage,"[6] and these also are central to the action of Albee's play set in New Carthage. In ironic contrast to the idealized conception of a college campus as the seat of tolerance, humanism, magnanimity, and the disinterested pursuit of truth, at New Carthage competitiveness, materialism, conformism, and intellectual and moral compromises predominate. In these four plays, in a way somewhat comparable to that of T. S. Eliot, Albee succeeds in bringing metaphysical significance to an apparently conventional drawing room setting.

Some of the sets for the stage productions have emphasized the suprarealism of these plays. For example, the set designed by William Ritman for the off-Broadway production of The American Dream was, basically, the standard living room of an expensive apartment; however, everything was slightly awry. Tall, gray panels--only slightly misaligned --formed the walls. Romanesque arches connected the living room to other rooms that were reported to disappear. Gilt and brocade furniture--a bit too heavy and synthetic--filled the room. Gilded, pictureless frames, immediately suggesting the same absence of any kind of love that was suggested by the two empty frames owned by Jerry in The Zoo Story, hung on the walls. Over the fireplace were two crossed, upside-down American flags, a comment on the present state and a warning. Grandma's boxes, which seemed to proliferate in the room, suggested not only the rigid limits to the awareness and humanity of the characters but also man's loss of control over his physical environment, creating a general, pervasive sense of helplessness. Expensive and tasteless, the room clearly evinced the personalities of the people who lived there; no intimacy and no sense of permanence existed.

The set for the New York production of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, an expensively decorated room containing many bookcases, a large hi-fi set, a fully equipped bar, and a large impressionistic painting, was intended to implicate the entire comfortable, articulate, liberal, educated community. The remainder of the properties emphasized the fact that the play was to have meaning beyond the realistic level: the early American furniture, the sturdy, exposed, oak beams, a large wrought-iron eagle over the fireplace, and an American flag placed upside down on one wall. Within this room, which symbolized the whole of American history, tradition, ideals, and intellectual and material achievement, four characters engaged in a savage battle for superiority, and George sat to read about The Decline of the West: "And the west, encumbered by crippling alliances and burdened with a morality too rigid to accommodate itself to the swing of events, must . . . eventually . . . fall." (VW, p.174)

The setting, action, and language of A Delicate Balance epitomize the "decline" that Albee is warning against in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? and throughout his plays. At the initial production of the play, the curtain went up at the Martin Beck Theatre on a set which Walter Kerr described as "a setting that seems already to have floated away. There, in the background, are perfectly familiar bookshelves, probably solid chandeliers, all of the potted ferns of the world's onetime comfort. But everything that is solid is recessed, slipping off into shadow. Downstage, near us, is an amber void in which the characters live and have their non-being."[7] Large and cavernous, the set reflected the hollowness of the lives of the wealthy, idle, bored people who inhabit this luxurious environment. The actors were almost dwarfed by the size

and grandeur of the set; they looked small and remote, and they seemed pathetic and rather helpless, in spite of their expensive clothes and jewelry, their articulate, cultured speech, and the perpetual flow of expensive liquor.

The characters moved in a milieu of proper, restrained, aloof elegance. Ironically, attainment of the "American Dream" of material success is shown to have served only to create great emotional distances --paralleled by the vast physical distances of the set--between people who desperately long for the closeness and comfort of friendship and love but whose conformity, indecision and guilt trap them in a situation in which their lives are cloyed by money, liquor, time, and words. The very real cage that confines the characters in A Delicate Balance is no more acceptable because it has gilded bars.

In All Over, the idea of "waiting" is the key to every aspect of the dramatic production. In the first production of the play, nearly motionless, waiting characters surrounded a raised platform on which a huge, four-poster, canopied bed was placed. The Husband lay on the regal bed, dying, cut off from the view of the other characters and the audience by a hospital screen. The soft white of the plain hospital screen stood out in contrast to the remaining furnishings of the room. The walls of the set consisted of straight, black panels; the chairs were upholstered in black leather; the atmosphere was heavy and bleak. Behind and on both sides of the set, stage equipment, wiring, and spotlights were exposed, as in The Sandbox, in order to make a symbolic point, which becomes clear in one of the Wife's speeches. She describes a visit to the Husband in the hospital where he lay, hooked up to machines which sustained his existence. Through an elaborate system

of medical gadgetry--wires, tubes, transfusions, gauges--he had been kept minimally alive in the hospital; but he chooses death over existence in that dependent, meaningless, vegetable-like state. In contrast, the other characters lack the strength to "unhook" from their dependency on the Husband. Although nearly dead, he remains the only source of vitality among the group. Anne Paolucci explains that "He is the heartbeat of the dramatic action; the others nearby are 'wired' into him like the TV camera downstairs and the audience itself are 'wired' into the action. . . . As originally staged, the backstage apparatus of ropes and wires was left visible on both sides of the isolated set to extend the range of the conceit still further."[8]

As in The Sandbox, while the obvious emphasis on stage mechanics keeps one aware of the play's artifice, it also physically draws the audience member into the play, since the setting for the action of the play is shown not to end at the limits of the stage but to extend into the theatre and, by implication, even further. While subtle but momentous things occur behind the impenetrable, white screen--forcefully shown at one point in the play by the Nurse's return from behind the screen, her white uniform and hands spotted with blood--the characters wait in the room; reporters and cameramen wait outside the doors shown on stage in order to pass on the news to their waiting audiences; and the theatre audience waits for information, for explanations, for reconciliations, and for resolutions that never occur.

Although the emphasis is of course on the words and action within the walls of the rooms that provide the settings for these four of Albee's plays, other unseen, off-stage people, actions, or objects intensify the onstage pressure and tension. The dying man behind the

white screen and the visible and unseen concentric circles of waiting people in All Over are two obvious examples. At the beginning of The American Dream, one finds another example as Mommy and Daddy nervously wait for the arrival of someone from outside their enclosed world, the ubiquitous "they" of an impersonal, bureaucratic society who will finally bring the long awaited "satisfaction." Grandma both longs for and fears the arrival of the Van Man, the messenger of death, to bring her release. In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, the unseen rooms are the source of objects and actions that heighten the suspense of the play and increase the tension and hostility among the characters. George returns to the stage with a gun; however, when he shoots the gun at Martha, the surprising emergence of a "large red and yellow Chinese parasol" (VW, p.57), and not death, is the result. George also returns from off-stage bearing flowers for Martha which he ominously calls "flores para los muertos." (VW, p.195) At the end of Act Two, the audience sees and hears a conversation between George and Honey, but the action that is directly responsible for the onstage tension and that stimulates George's reaction which later results in the violent climax of the play--that is, Martha's attempted infidelity with Nick--is occuring off-stage. Similarly, the literal and symbolic battle for possession of Julia's unseen bedroom in A Delicate Balance is responsible for much of the onstage action. Harry and Edna try to hide there from their "terror"; Julia wants to return to her room that she had as a little girl, repossessing not only the room but also the security and innocence of her childhood. In each of these plays, the unseen, implicit off-stage action and reactions in invisible rooms serve to increase the level of pressure and the sense of confinement within the onstage room;

no help or release seems to be possible for the characters trapped within the rooms.

This idea is further emphasized by the endings of the plays. The American Dream ends with Mommy and Daddy's preparations to begin again with a new "bumble of joy," one which they hope will finally bring their long desired satisfaction. The play ends with Grandma's disturbing evaluation of the situation: "Everybody's got what he thinks he wants." (AD, p.127) Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? ends with Martha and George's preparations to begin their lives again; they must consciously choose if they will live honestly and authentically, without their games and illusions. About the possibility of that new life, George says,"It will be [better] . . . maybe." (VW, p.240) A Delicate Balance ends with a repetition of the words spoken by Agnes at the beginning of the play. The characters prepare to try to forget Edna and Harry's nightmarish disruption of their precariously maintained balance and to return to the habit and order that accompany daylight. Agnes says, "Come now; we can begin the day." (DB, p.175) All Over ends with the Doctor's answer to the Wife's question which begins the play: "Is he dead?" (AO, p.3) Between the question and the answer in All Over and between beginnings and endings that are far too much alike in other plays, a few characters have gained some awareness of their situations and some self-awareness and have determined to act to change their lives; but most have chosen to remain inside the womb or the cave. The characters are trapped and confined; but much of this is self-imposed and self-sustained by their refusal to act and to face reality, by their desperate fear of life outside the security and familiarity--regardless how stifling--of the cave or the womb. Therefore, the situations that

underlay the beginnings of the plays still remain. Although deaths of friendships, of illusions, and of people occur, most characters live on to face indefinitely the unsolved problems. Since little of any significance has changed in their lives, they seem condemned to endure the same conflicts repeatedly. They learn very little from the confrontations that comprise the drama. Thus, the catharsis of traditional tragic drama cannot occur, nor can any unequivocable "happy endings" be achieved. In the four plays The American Dream, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, A Delicate Balance, and All Over, Albee develops a dramatic situation, shows how the characters respond (some better than others), but provides no definite information about the outcome of the experience. The audience must find the catharsis or the happy ending independent of the theatre experience, in their own minds and lives.

This also is the effect achieved by Albee's highly controversial play, Tiny Alice, which offers little resolution or surety to an audience member but which, instead, stimulates further questioning. The set and props for the play are evocative and ambiguous. Every aspect of the play is conceived as image and symbol. The play is clearly allegorical; thus, as in effective allegorical works, every part of the dramatic fabric--language, characters, action, tone, set, and props--contributes to the cumulative build-up of multi-leveled meaning. This meaning gains in depth and complexity as the mysteries underlying the play expand. Albee stated in an interview that Tiny Alice is a mystery play in at least two quite different senses of that word: "That is, it's both a metaphysical mystery and, at the same time, a conventional 'Dial M for Murder'-type mystery."[9] Structurally, the play is a paradigm of mystery. Questions are raised in every scene and act; the succeeding scenes and acts do not

answer the existing questions but replace them with others which become progressively more complex and abstract. As well, most of the action of the play takes place in a vast, reconstructed castle, and, for North Americans, this setting almost inevitably evokes associations with the mansion-settings of Gothic stories of mystery and evil. The setting immediately suggests secret rooms and labyrinthine passages. The talk of long unused, cob-web covered chapels and decaying wine cellars suggests the potential for neglect, cruelty, and evil inherent in the characters. The introduction of a corrupt priest, a sinister Lawyer, a strangely unconventional butler, a beautiful and eccentric woman possessing infinite wealth, and an innocent man who must encounter all these forces unavoidably suggests many of the earlier mystery works in literature.

In fact, Albee's skillful intimation of familiar forms has led one critic to claim that the play is "virtually a theatrical echo chamber."[10] Parallels to Genet, Duerrenmatt, Strindberg, Eliot, and others unquestionably do exist in Tiny Alice and, one assumes, are deliberate as Albee attempts to evoke all one's accumulated responses to and associations with symbolic, perplexing, and significant dramatic works that question and expose the most basic assumptions of modern man. Albee again uses for ironic effect the audience member's associations with traditional drama; therefore, the play that results is not merely a pastiche. It is a further step in Albee's examination of the human condition.

Albee asserted that Tiny Alice is about "something very small enclosed in something else."[11] The source of the central image of Tiny Alice came from Albee's reading of a newspaper account of a man who was imprisoned within a room which was within a similar, larger room, and so on. As Bigsby explains, "Something about this 'Chinese-box'

situation appealed to him both because of its relevance to the problems of dramatic structure and because of the fascinating metaphysical aspects which these contingent realities suggested."[12] The result is a play that is a vivid symbol of man's search for the "real" core at the center of the widening levels of illusions, deceptions, and inauthenticities that have come to comprise man's life. The elusive, ambiguous, and paradoxical setting and structure of the play suggest that man's search may yield him no more surety and satisfaction than Peer Gynt's search for the core of the onion.

The vast and elaborate castle within which most of the action of the play takes place is an exact reconstruction of the original, transported through time and space to a new location. The new location of the castle is given no definite time or place, and the currency of Miss Alice's billions is never stated. One almost automatically assumes that the setting is contemporary and Western, but the lack of specificity is deliberate. The one specific aspect of the set that is "essential," according to Albee's stage directions, is the doll's-house model of the castle, sitting at the center back stage. This model is the symbolic core of the play, the literal presentation of the images created within one's head, the symbol of the process of abstraction in one's search for the final reality.

The duplicate, miniature castle is within the larger castle. This idea of things--objects or people--within other identical, but larger, things and multiple layers and levels is repeatedly emphasized as the play begins: Within the Cardinal's elegant garden, as the Cardinal and Lawyer talk, two birds in "an elaborate birdcage . . . with some foliage in it" (TA, p.1) duplicate, and parody, the two men. A man named Butler

is contained within the function of a butler; and within the old woman's mask and wig worn by Miss Alice is a beautiful young woman. The young woman is enclosed within the role of the old woman, and, conversely, the potential for the old woman exists within the young woman. This disguise implies further disguises, suggesting the infinite. Furthermore, emphasis is placed not only on the simultaneous existence of multiple levels but also on the possibility for interaction among levels: The fire that is consuming the chapel in the large castle is first discovered in the model. As the ceremony of Alice is performed by the characters, rooms in the model light up, and several of the characters discuss the movement through dimensions and levels that occurred following the wedding:

> LAWYER: (Points to a place in the model) Since the wedding was . . . here . . . and we are (Indicates the room they are in) here . . . we have come quite a . . . dimension, have we not? (TA, p.141)

Other stage props, by thus further reinforcing the major thematic concerns of the play, also become dramatic script. For example, the small phrenological head that remains on stage throughout the play provides visual emphasis for the idea of Julian's intellectual, rational search for pure, absolute certainty in an issue that is, finally, unknowable and based on subjective responses. The skull--staring "Unblinking, outward, through to some horizon" (TA, p.182)--is an implicit criticism of Julian's view of life, because Julian's eyes are similarly fixed on the abstract, missing or avoiding contact with the flesh and blood of the here and now. Most vividly, however, the preposterous final visual image of the bare skull covered by Miss Alice's wig which she wore when she played the role of the old woman draws together the mystery of the beginning of the play with the death that

ends the play. The wig, as a symbol of the games, role-playing, and deceptions of the dialogue and action of the play, combines with the phrenological skull, the symbol of the search for the authentic and real, creating a paradoxical emblem of the inseparable union of the multiple levels of man's life, of truth and illusions, and of dramatic structure with theme. Every aspect of this metaphysical mystery play works to raise questions and paradoxes within questions and paradoxes. As in Albee's earlier plays, final resolution must follow the conclusion of the theatrical experience and must take place in the mind of the viewer.

Although not necessarily more symbolic than the setting of Tiny Alice and other of Albee's plays, the setting of Box-Mao-Box is the most abstract and does require that the audience "be willing to experience a work on its own terms" (Box, p.9), as Albee suggests. On an otherwise empty stage, a large, brightly-lit box that is slightly irregular in shape--just enough both to emphasize and distort the shape of the cube--is seen. This box is the strongest development of Albee's many "box" symbols: One of Jerry's few possessions in The Zoo Story is a strongbox with a broken lock, containing mementos of his brief happiness as a child and sad, pleading letters "from more recent years" (ZS, p.23); and the rooms in his rooming-house are merely "laughably small" boxes that keep apart the people inside them, like cubical cages in a zoo. The sandbox into which Grandma is dumped suggests her death, her return to the earth and the source of her life, and her coffin; the clearly defined limits of the box emphasize the decreasing boundaries of her life. In The American Dream, Grandma again appears, this time carrying many neatly wrapped boxes of varying shapes and sizes, filled with "some old letters,

a couple of regrets . . . Pekinese . . . blind at that . . . the television . . . my Sunday teeth . . . eighty-six years of living . . . some sounds . . . a few images, a little garbled by now . . . and, well . . . you know . . . the things one accumulates." (AD, p.120) She takes the boxes with her wherever she goes; they are her past, her present, and her future: memories, futility, and death. The sandbox and Grandma's boxes can be seen, simultaneously, as "the grave, regression, dreams, heaven, escape, peace, even sexual fulfillment."[13] The characters in other of Albee's plays may not carry boxes, but they exist within box-like rooms that, regardless of their opulence, serve to emphasize the limits, boundaries, and confinement that are the essence of the lives of these characters, who are "boxed into" meaningless existences by their illusions, fears, and withdrawal.

In the short play Box, the size of the actual box that sits in the center of the stage is quite large, emphasizing its central importance in the play. Again, the box represents, contains, and is the memories of the past, the present desperate hopes, and the inevitable future, death; but this time the box specifically relates not just to a particular character or characters within the play but, by implication, to all mankind. It is the box within which Western civilization finds itself, both limited by and filled with pain, injustice, corruption, and the destruction of old values and ideals. There is still room to move around within the box, so the possibility for change and improvement does still minimally exist; it has not yet become Grandma's sandbox. But the box can easily become the coffin for both the body and the spirit of what appears to be a self-annihilating people. The Voice (that is supposed to seem to come from within one's own head) repetitiously warns against

the reduction of life and experience and against the retreats, limitations, and capitulations that the box can symbolize, implying that the past that the box encloses can either be used as the basis for positive changes, or it can become a hiding place while one waits for death.

In Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, the box becomes part of the ocean liner that is the setting for that play: "The outline of the cube remains; the set for Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung appears within the outlines of the cube during the brief blackout." (Box p.32) Combining these two symbols, Albee creates a resonant scenic image: on a ship, adrift and outward bound, are three symbolic figures--Mao, the insurgent revolutionary, the Long-Winded Lady who "looks very average and upper middle-class," and a poor, rejected old woman--each representative of a different kind of level of isolation, banality, and inauthenticity. This ship of fools is contained within the potential "doom box"[14] of civilization; and each character is further trapped within his own delimiting and confining psychological "box" (be it singleminded and fanatical devotion to a cause, loneliness, regrets, or fear) just as effectively as the tenants who shared Jerry's roominghouse were trapped within their cubical rooms.

The Voice who speaks the monologue that comprises the play Box both begins and ends that play by speaking the word "box"; the larger play Box-Mao-Box also begins and ends with that same word. Thus, the word "box" creates what Ruby Cohn calls a "verbal container."[15] By establishing the boundaries of the play, by confining and delimiting, the word "does" what it "means." On an even broader level, the play can become the symbol that it presents; unless man acts to change himself and his society, the play itself can unequivocably be seen as a symbolic coffin, the box containing the symbolic remains of a once-vital

civilization. And, as with the ever-extending "wires" in the play All Over, the conceit that informs Box-Mao-Box can be expanded almost indefinitely--to the theatre, to American society, and to Western civilization.

The concept of boxes within boxes pervades the language and action of the play. Furthermore, as Anne Paolucci explains, the treatment of the concept of time--both stage time and real time--in Box-Mao-Box serves to emphasize the idea of the perplexing concentricity of life:

> In Box dramatic action becomes . . . a reduction of time to a spectrum of absolute moments, each reflecting a completed cycle or lifetime. There is no dramatic situation or setting as we have come to know them in other plays, no progression; rather, an unraveling of impressions depicted as a series of reverberations, of concentric expanding circles of meaning, repetitions of an eternal present.[16]

Through Albee's skillful use of all the aspects of staging, in Box-Mao-Box and in his eight other original plays, the audience member is forced to perceive the boxes within boxes, cages within cages, and mysteries within mysteries that constitute modern man's life.

The actual box seen on the stage during Box-Mao-Box constantly reminds the audience member of unending levels of entrapment just as other stage props used by Albee emphasize major ideas in other plays: Peter's bench in The Zoo Story, Grandma's sandbox in The Sandbox, the Nurse's desk in The Death of Bessie Smith, the model castle and the phrenological head in Tiny Alice, the ever-present liquor glasses in A Delicate Balance, and the hospital screen in All Over. Even briefly used stage props may have strong impact when skillfully employed by Albee in his plays, as Gerald Weales states in his discussion of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?:

> One of the best inventions in all of Albee is the gun with the parasol in it, for what better way of seeing the relationship of Martha and George than in terms of a murderous weapon that is also a sheltering object.[17]

The trick gun is both a "metaphor for the marriage"[18] and a symbolic foreshadowing of the action in the third act of the play, in which near destruction is, simultaneously, a source of possible regeneration.

The visible arrangement of the characters on stage also serves, along with the use of props that take on increasing symbolic significance, to emphasize the major ideas in Albee's plays. For example, The Zoo Story begins with the character Peter seated upon a park bench. At the end of the play, Peter and Jerry have exchanged places, and Jerry sits on the bench as the play concludes. Albeit unwillingly, Peter has taken on Jerry's earlier role of a "dispossessed" person who must find a way to reconcile himself to the world; the bench becomes the place of Jerry's literal, physical death, just as it had been the place of Peter's emotional and moral death.

Similarly, Scene One, Act One, of Tiny Alice begins with the Lawyer talking nonsense words to the caged birds in the Cardinal's garden; however, the scene ends with the Cardinal's duplication of the Lawyer's earlier pose and words. The positions of power have changed, with the superiority shifting from the Cardinal to the Lawyer. Thus, the positions of the two characters on stage are reversed in order to add further visual emphasis to that psychological shift.

In the same way, at the conclusion of the play The Death of Bessie Smith, one can determine the moral position of each character by his position on the stage. At the end of the play, the Negro Orderly moves closer to the bitter, cynical white Nurse, "avoiding JACK" (BS, p.78),

thereby physically signifying his psychological alignment with the Nurse in her opposition to any threats to the status quo. The Orderly is described in the stage directions as standing with "his back to the wall" (BS, p.80) as the play ends, thus assuming a physical stance that parallels and emphasizes his hopeless mental state.

In contrast, the grouping of characters at the end of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? emphasizes the tentative hopefulness implicit in the conclusion of that play. The stage directions state that George quietly moves to Martha, who is seated on the floor, and "puts his hand gently her shoulder; she puts her head back" (VW, p.241) so that it touches his body. For the first time during the play, these two characters are united, touching each other both physically and emotionally in a non-destructive, loving way.

Albee carefully uses all the available physical attributes of the stage to increase the psychological effect of his plays on the audience member. He uses settings, stage props, lighting, and other technical stage effects in order to help develop the image of the world presented in each of his plays. That image becomes increasingly more confined and life-denying throughout the plays, and the concept of an "enclosed world" becomes increasingly more applicable. In The Zoo Story, the image of the world is that of a large, hot, noisy, stinking zoo where "everyone [is] separated by [social and psychological, as well as physical] bars from everyone else." (ZS, p.40) Because of the barriers that keep human beings from giving and receiving love, the world has become merely a "humiliating excuse for a jail." (ZS, p.35) Similarly, in The Death of Bessie Smith, the image of life that is perceived by the characters,

and presented to the audience, is that of a forced internment in a stagnating, "hot, stupid, fly ridden world." (BS, p.70)

In The American Dream, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, A Delicate Balance, Box-Mao-Box, and All Over, the enclosed, confined sets are meant to suggest a womb, a cave, or a box. In each of these plays, life is seen to be a comic or cruel nightmare of inconsistencies, contradictions, and dissatisfaction, even inside the most real and solid rooms. In All Over, Albee's most recent play, the bleakest image of the world is developed; the world is merely a deathchamber in which life is a death-watch for other people, for oneself, and for the entire Western civilization. Indeed, Albee does make all aspects of the theatrical experience evocative as he makes the stage itself "articulate," adding further emphasis to his persistent concern with the self-imposed, self-perpetuated, and ultimately self-destructive confinements of modern man. The resulting dissonance that is created in the mind of the audience member by Albee's use and manipulation of all possible theatrical elements must be resolved by individuals through independent thought, beyond the boundaries of time and place that delimit the theatrical experience.

Chapter Two: Characterization

The characters who inhabit the enclosed worlds of Albee's plays function as effectively as the settings do in creating a sense of dissonance in the audience member. Albee displays the modern concern with the dissolution of individual personality, a concern shared by such playwrights as Pirandello, Ionesco, Beckett, and Pinter. This concern leads these twentieth century writers to employ an old dramatic technique, that is, the creation of characters as types and symbols. Albee's characters show this dissolution of individual personality, but they still have force and interest as dramatic figures. They are ambiguous, paradoxical, and particularly disquieting creations because they are recognizable exaggerations of real kinds of human beings, not totally bizarre creations of fantasy. As exaggerations, stereotypes, symbols, and personifications of states of mind or of mindlessly accepted ideas and ideals, they are, simultaneously, distinctly individualized characters, and, just as distinctly, Everyman or Everywoman. With this basis in reality, they cannot be summarily dismissed, and one must recognize that they constitute effective parodies of authentic human personalities. This point is well emphasized by Daddy's inability to remember the name of the efficient, busy Clubwoman who comes to the apartment in The American Dream. Mrs. Barker, although a distinctive character creation, also is representative of a contemporary type and, as Daddy's behavior implies, her specific name does not matter.

In Albee's original plays, over half the characters have no specific names but, instead, are identified by a generic designation, that is, a function name such as Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, Nurse, Lawyer, Long-Winded Lady, or Best Friend. This impersonal method of identifying people by their function or by their relationship to some other person or factor outside themselves suggests that these characters are somehow cut off from a complete, full, and self-sufficient life. The generic designations imply their state as nameless, dehumanized ciphers like Rice's Mr. and Mrs. Zero in The Adding Machine or their ubiquity, like that of the "Martins" and the "Smiths" in Ionesco's Bald Soprano. Furthermore, one almost unavoidably holds certain expectations for those who fill the traditional roles which the generic terms designate. However, Albee's use of function names constitutes another example of his manipulation of the audience member's expectations. For example, the basis of the function name "Mommy" is a female's relationship to her child; in the traditional relationship, this was assumed to be a protective, loving, unselfish role. However, the Mommies in The Sandbox and The American Dream are, most importantly, childless, as well as egocentric, loveless, and unresponsive. The Daddies are sickly, impotent, subjugated, and pathetic. Grandma, who looks the part of the traditional grandmotherly lady, being described as an eighty-six-year-old, "tiny wizened woman with bright eyes" (SB, p.8), is, instead, independent, vigorous, and cynical. The Grandma in Albee's plays objects to the cultural assumptions about old people by mocking them. She rejects the stereotyped attributes of old age, "colitis and lavender perfume" (72); instead, she "drinks and smokes" (AD, p.80) and uses bad language. And, being a very

resourceful person" of "pioneer stock" (AD, p.112), she makes money on the side by cheating in baking contests.

In the same way, the Angel of Death in The Sandbox is a reversion of the usual depiction of this figure as a "grim reaper" or a withered old hag; instead, he is a handsome, athletic, sexy-looking young man of twenty-five, dressed in a bathing suit. The Nurse in The Death of Bessie Smith, who comes from an old Southern family that was once a great "name," is given no specific name, emphasizing that she is now as empty of humanity as that family name--no longer a great one--is of power. The Nurse reverses the behavior that one would normally expect from a person filling that role. She neither nourishes, protects, nor cares for any other person in the play. Instead, she brings emotional and physical pain to all those around her, even attempting to stop the Intern from giving medical aid to a badly injured person. The Lawyer in Tiny Alice is a sinister, suspicious man who cold-bloodedly shoots and kills another person, and the Cardinal in that play is corrupt and vicious and willing to "sell the soul" of one of his followers for a large enough sum of money. Similarly, the Minister in Box-Mao-Box belies his label as he remains absolutely silent, and possibly asleep, and offers no consolation or aid to the woman who talks to him, desperately seeking help in finding meaning for her life. The Wife and the Mistress in All Over, who calmly sit together awaiting the death of their husband and lover, like, respect, and have sympathy for each other.

Therefore, since the actions and attitudes of a person within a role are distortions of the usual, traditional expectations for that role, it is not surprising that the interactions among characters fail to fulfill the usual expectations. The Mommies and Daddies have

effected an exaggerated reversal of sex roles (a trait which continues among the men and women throughout most of Albee's other plays). Agnes, in A Delicate Balance, states that the "sexes are reversing, or coming to resemble each other too much, at any rate." (DB, p.65) The resulting interactions between male and female, between Daddy and Mommy, parody both that situation itself which Albee perceives in contemporary American society and the entire traditional concept of a supposedly loving, intimate relationship in which one person was expected to be a passive and submissive functionary of a larger, more forceful, egocentric person. Daddy remains cowed and dependent while Mommy, aggressive, manipulative, and self-assured, makes and forcefully directs all the plans. Daddy whines and fawns while Mommy dismisses him with a contemptuous laugh. With The Sandbox and The American Dream, in which Mommy and Daddy first appear, Albee begins his questioning not only of sex roles but also of the basis of traditional family structure. Mommy and Daddy do not love each other, and their attitude toward an aging parent is based not on love but on expediency. Grandma is treated as a bothersome housepet or a housekeeper; but when she becomes older, unable to "earn her keep" (AD, p.67) and more trouble, Mommy and Daddy react by wishing for the arrival of the Van Man or by encouraging her to die, as in The Sandbox. Grandma, one must note, is not entirely blameless either; she refers to her only daughter as a "big cow" (SB, p.14) and frequently regrets the effort expended in raising Mommy. Mrs. Barker recognizes the similarities and relationships that strongly exist between Grandma and Mommy, and, using her typical form of distorted cliché, asserts to Grandma: "You're your daughter's mother, all right!" (AD, p.95)

The treatment afforded the "bumble of joy" by Mommy and Daddy, described by Grandma in a grimly humorous monologue, is shocking and cruel. That neither parent can remember the name of their first adopted child is not surprising; the child was simply another object to them, a possession that should have furnished the requisite satisfactions, but it proved to be defective. The relationship between the Wife and her Daughter and Son in All Over is equally as brutal. All three characters desire to love and to be loved, but their only verbal and physical exchanges are marked by hostility, bitterness, disgust, and regret. The Son and the Daughter, loveless and ineffectual, cry out throughout the play in attempts to be heard and seen and to have their existence and worth acknowledged by their mother, but they are ignored or rebuffed by the Wife. In these and many other cases, one sees that the words, actions, and interactions of the characters in Albee's plays conflict with one's assumptions about the appropriate behavior for the traditional roles that the characters ostensibly are filling, according to the generic, function names that they bear.

When characters are given names, as in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? and A Delicate Balance, the emphasis is not on the uniqueness of each of the individuals but is on the similarities among these characters who are symbols of all human beings trapped in inauthenticity. This point is emphasized by the description given by Albee of Edna and Harry--as "very much like Agnes and Tobias" (DB, p.9)--and by the final words of Edna to Agnes as the visitors prepare to leave their friends' home:

AGNES: Don't be a stranger.

EDNA: Oh, good Lord, how could we be? Our lives are . . . the same. (DB, pp.170-171)

The two couples live in the same wealthy suburb and belong to the same club; the men share business interests and, one summer long ago, committed adultery with the same woman; the women make their trips to the city together. Their sameness is even more pointedly emphasized, however: When Edna scolds Julia, her godchild, for her childish behavior, Albee's stage directions indicate that she "become[s] Agnes." Furthermore, at one point in the play, Agnes says to Harry, "Will you make me a drink, Harry, since you're being Tobias." (DB, p.110) C. W. E. Bigsby states that Edna and Harry are to be seen as extensions of the personalities of Agnes and Tobias: "Thus, while the friends can be granted a separate identity, they can also be seen as expressions of the suppressed fears of Agnes and Tobias."[1] As well, one must assume that the sameness of the lives of the audience members to those of the characters on stage is to be inferred.

Functioning in the same way, as simultaneous foils and parallels, Nick and Honey can be seen as younger versions of George and Martha, as copies of George and Martha twenty years earlier when they had the dreams of their youth. But those dreams were destroyed by the reality of life and experience, and they sought compensation and consolation by creating illusions to live in instead of new dreams to strive for. Since the relationship between Nick and Honey is founded on the same kinds of deceptions, evasions, and dishonesty that characterize the lives of George and Martha, the older couple serve as a warning to the younger one of what they will become if they do not make changes in their lives.

The relationship between the two specifically named characters in The Zoo Story is slightly different. Jerry and Peter initially are

seen as two quite dissimilar characters. Peter, with his tweed jacket, pipe, and horn-rimmed glasses, is both the epitome and a parody of the ideal, conforming, consuming, middle-class man. Ironically, Peter's first act in the play is to wipe his glasses fastidiously; however, he refuses to see beyond the narrow limits of society's imposed standards of behavior or morality. Jerry, on the other hand, is essential man, stripped of all props that impose stability or ostensible meaning on to man's life. He is without a home, family, friends, vocation or avocation, possessions, social position, or innocence--all of which Peter has. He comes to Peter with a newly discovered awareness of the necessity, but near impossibility, of human love and contact. By the end of the play, Peter has taken over a part of Jerry's role. Peter has been forced into contact with Jerry; and just as Jerry's interaction with the dog drove him to seek a deeper understanding of contact and communication, so Peter's interaction with Jerry will persist in his mind and will undoubtedly drive him to effect changes in his life. Peter leaves his old secluded park bench, which now belongs to Jerry, a changed person. Frightened, bewildered, and unable ever again to be exactly what he was before, Peter is not free. However, at least he is aware of the existence of his cage which separates him from contact with other human beings, and that is a necessary first step in his possible escape.

In The Zoo Story, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, and A Delicate Balance, the audience member is encouraged to see the sameness of the lives of all the characters on stage and, by extension, of his own life. In only one instance does the ascribing of names to certain characters seem to make a real statement about the differences between the named

and the unnamed characters in their levels of humanity, authenticity, and entrapment. In the play The Death of Bessie Smith, only three characters--Bernie, a minor figure who is seen only once, Bessie Smith, who never appears on stage, and Jack, who is briefly seen in three scenes--are given specific names. The rest of the characters are identified by function names. Gilbert Debusscher offers an explanation for the naming of the three characters:

> All three are authentic Negroes who suffer, hope and die because they have been born black. . . . The Orderly, who has disowned his essence, has also lost his name. In contrast with the other Negroes in the play, he is only the anonymous "orderly."[2]

The Orderly, the Intern, and the Nurse interact on the level of destructive games, and all seem to have compromised varying amounts of their humanity in attaining their minimal security. They lack the independence and humanity of Bessie and Jack, which comes across in the few scenes which concern them. Nonetheless, James Baldwin has complained that the play is "bloodless," and that there is nothing that strongly illuminates "the contrast between the wonderfully reckless life and terrible death of Bessie Smith and the whited sepulchre in which the nurse is writhing."[3] Baldwin's statement clearly points up the real paradoxical effect of the play. Although the names emphasize the contrast between the two groups of characters, those inside and those outside the confining walls of the hospital, the play also is meant to point up the similarities in the positions of all the characters. Not only Bessie Smith, but also the Nurse, the Intern, and the Orderly, are shown to be trapped and in some way destroyed by an environment contaminated with many kinds of fear and hatred. Racism can develop only in a society in which other values have come to be considered more important than human ones and in which

intelligent, sensitive people repress their ability to empathize. Such a society must inevitably be equally damaging to all who live within it, black or white.

Just as an examination on a literal level of the names of the characters in Albee's plays reveals paradoxes and creates dissonance in the mind of the audience member or reader, an examination of the possible symbolic significance of some of the names, both specific and generic, adds depth and complexity to the characters. Awareness of possible allusions and symbolism inherent in a character's name does not provide the key that transforms the rest of the play into a one-to-one allegory. However, it does add to the complex texture of the play, as the characters become more elusive as they become more allusive.

For example, the name of the character Peter in The Zoo Story is the Greek word for "rock." Lee Baxandall has noted the significant, ironic double symbolism of this name: Peter is "the rock on which institutions stand"[4]; as well, because of his abdication of responsibility for his own life and his resulting dehumanization, he also simply exists as an object in the world, equivalent to the stones and trees around him. A third plausible symbolic interpretation of the name is presented by Rose Zimbardo in her traditional Christian interpretation of the play. In that interpretation, Peter is seen as Saint Peter of the Bible, "an average worldling who is stripped by the irresistible Jerry of his material goods and led toward a revelation of truth,"[5] and who betrays and then comforts Jerry. Of course, in Zimbardo's interpretation, Jerry is Jesus, a "thirty-year-old outcast whose purpose is to establish contact 'with God, who I'm told turned his back on the whole thing some time ago,'"[6] and with mankind, as represented by Peter.

Thus, Jerry dies to "save Peter's soul from death by spiritual starvation,"[7] and his dying pose on the bench made of wood and iron is seen as a symbol of Christ's crucifixion. Compounding the biblical interpretation, Baxandall states that Jerry is a kind of modern-day Jeremiah, denouncing false gods and seeking to reawaken men's individual consciences. However, analysis of the symbolic implications of the names of these two characters is not limited to one interpretation. Epitomizing the analyses of The Zoo Story as the depiction of an attempt at homosexual contact is Paul Witherington's assertion that Jerry, willingly seeks and accepts the knife held by Peter and thus "acts out the implications of his name Jerry (slang for chamber pot) with Peter (slang for penis)."[8] Nonetheless, however dissimilar the results of Witherington's and Zimbardo's name-analysis are, both finally assert that Jerry basically is to be seen as a figure who is seeking meaningful contact with other human beings.

The names of George and Martha in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? elicit inevitable associations with George and Martha Washington. In several published interviews, Albee has affirmed that he had in mind this couple when he chose the names of his characters who are to represent the accumulated history and traditions in America. Albee further stated that the fantasy child, described by George as "our own little all-American something or other," can be seen as "the revolutionary principles of this country that we haven't lived up to yet."[9] Furthermore, Ruby Cohn points out that just as "the legendary George Washington could not tell a lie, Albee's George murders in the name of Truth."[10] The name of the character Nick also has elicited strong associations. First, since on one level George and Martha represent the ideals underlying the

founding of America such as personal freedom, equality, limitless opportunities for all, democracy, and so on, their opponent, the scientist who is the symbol of the "wave of the future," has been "related to Nikita Khrushchev [as] . . . an exponent of a totalitarian society."[11] Second, as an ambitious, soulless climber, who appears to tolerate his wife only for her family's money and who will use any method to gain more power, the character also has been related to "Old Nick."[12] Honey, his wife, is "the quintessence of sweetness, of which the appetite must eventually sicken and so die."[13]

The role played by the character Claire in A Delicate Balance is emphasized by her name, which suggests her clairvoyance in anticipating the arrival of the "terror" via Harry and Edna and the clarity of her insight. Although Agnes speaks the following words in a sarcastic manner, that does not negate their accuracy in describing Claire:

> Claire could tell us so much if she cared to. . . . Claire, who watches from the sidelines, has seen so very much, has seen us all so clearly, have you not, Claire. You were not named for nothing. (DB, p.110)

Julia, the confused daughter of the household, is called "Miss Julie" by Claire at one point in the play, emphasizing her similarity to the frustrated, self-destructive heroine of Strindberg's play whose weakness and confusion also result from the influence of her parents on her life. The verb form of the word Harry means to torment, to harass, and to invade and attempt destruction. Harry and Edna do have all these effects on the lives of the friends whose house they invade with their strange fear and their "plague." Further associations with the names of the remaining characters in the play have been pointed out by Professor Ruby Cohn:

> Harry, whom clear-sighted Claire calls "Old Harry," is a nickname of the devil, whereas Agnes is the lamb of God. The two couples, who are identical, range from angelic expressions of love to diabolic noncommitment. The other two names, Tobias and Edna, figure in the Book of Tobit. . . . Albee's parallels with the Book of Tobit are obscure; nevertheless, the Book of Tobit is concerned, like A Delicate Balance, with ties of blood and with the burial of the dead. Albee's Tobias is occasionally called Toby or Tobe, and like his biblical eponym, he is faced with the problem of Being.[14]

In Tiny Alice,[15] two characters have function names, one character bears the name of his function, and two characters have specific names, Julian and Miss Alice. In several places, Albee has rejected the suggestion that Julian is to call to mind Julian the Apostate, and, hence, apostasy, and that Alice, whose name is derived from the Greek word for "truth," is to stand for the idea of Absolute Truth that Julian finally accepts. Nonetheless, the associations in the mind of the audience member persist. William F. Lucey has suggested that the name "Miss Alice" means "mis (not) truth,"[16] and that Julian can only arrive at real truth, at "Alice," through a complex, ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory route which involves his acceptance, initially, of "mistruth." The tiny model and Julian's circuitous route also call to mind the tiny Alice of Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland. C. W. E. Bigsby elaborates on the obvious parallels between the two works:

> For clearly, Alice's Wonderland, as an escape from "dull reality," can be seen as a parallel to Julian's wonderland of religion, in so far as it grows out of a similar unwillingness to accept the restrictions of reality. Moreover, the confrontation of reality and illusion, which lies at the heart of Albee's play, is achieved in Carroll with a symbol which, like Albee's, is essentially Platonic.[17]

Of the unnamed characters, the designations of the Intern and the Orderly in The Death of Bessie Smith and of "the American Dream" in the play The American Dream are particularly significant as ironic comments

on the spiritual states of the men bearing the labels. For example, the Black Orderly does not dare to disturb the established order; he acquiesces to, and thus perpetuates, the status quo. As an intelligent, articulate and ambitious Negro man in a white supremacist society who has seen the negative results of earlier rebellions by Negro people, the Orderly has determined for himself that passivity is safest, although it makes him unacceptable both to blacks and whites. Thus, although the Orderly ends the play with "his back to the wall" (BS, p.80), in both the literal and figurative meanings of that phrase, he still refuses to take a chance and attempt to break out of his destructive, degrading place in the social order.

In contrast, the Intern breaks free of his "internment"--his confinement within the arbitrary, stifling boundaries that fear has imposed and maintained--to become irrevocably involved in the real world outside the white, sterile hospital walls that have bound him. When he makes an independent decision to break out of the constraints imposed by society, and when he re-enters the hospital covered with the blood of a black woman whom he had tried to help, he enters a potentially "free" man. As the Nurse's threat indicates, he can no longer be an Intern in that hospital; but on a deeper level, he no longer can be interned and dehumanized by his society's false values. In The American Dream, the young man whom Grandma labels "the American Dream" is described as a "clean-cut, midwest farm boy type, almost insultingly good-looking in a typically American way. Good profile, straight nose, honest eyes, wonderful smile . . ." (AD, p.107). However, the dream is hollow, because, as the young man explains, "I have no talents at all, except what you see . . . my person; my body, my face. In every

other way I am incomplete . . . ." (AD, p.113) The "American Dream" has retained his attractive, seductive shell, but he has lost his substance, vitality, and purpose. Like The Angel of Death in The Sandbox, whose looks, personality, and even initials he shares, he brings with him only hopelessness and death. The "Dream" is now merely a soulless, unfeeling automaton that will "do almost anything for money." (AD, p.109)

In every possible way, Albee's use of names--specific or generic--serves to stimulate audience reaction. Irony, resulting from the juxtaposition of generic names of characters and one's immediate expectations for a character bearing that function name with the actual words and actions of the characters, is effectively used by Albee in six of the nine original plays being considered in this study. In the other three plays, the inter-changeability among the named characters and the multiple symbolism of the names of the characters work to create the same effect, that is, to forestall what Jerry in The Zoo Story called "the old pigeonhole bit" (ZS, p.22) that attempts to impose a rigid, one-dimensional order and explicability on people, objects, and ideas. The ambiguity of the names of Albee's characters is simply one more way in which he attempts to stimulate the audience member to remain open to the action of the play, to see and hear what the characters do and say and not immediately and mindlessly to impose old expectations and assumptions onto the play and thus close off the ability of the play to present new and disturbing ideas.

What Albee's characters do say and do in the plays will stimulate awareness and new ideas in the minds of those audience members who are willing to approach the play with openness; but, as stated earlier, a state of cognitive dissonance precedes the state of awareness. Like

their names, the actions and reactions of the characters in Albee's plays--actions and reactions which constitute a parody of authentic human behavior and interaction and of meaningful activity--help create this necessary dissonance. Albee's plays are relatively actionless. Set in an enclosed physical area, the movement of the characters is equally as restricted. At the end of the play All Over, the Wife says, "All we've done is think about ourselves. Ultimately." (AO, p.110) This statement describes the basic action in each of Albee's plays; the characters engage in confessionals, recriminations, self-pity, self-loathing, and debilitating regret, not in physcial action or in words that forward an action-packed plot. The plays have the unfolding of complex ideas, not of a plot, as their aim.

The physical immobility of the characters parallels their mental and emotional stasis. Peter rises from his bench only in the last few minutes of The Zoo Story. The Nurse in The Death of Bessie Smith does not move from behind her admissions desk during the final seven scenes of the play. The Long-Winded Lady, the Old Woman, and the Minister do not move during Box-Mao-Box. The characters in All Over sit in the same chairs or stand in the same positions throughout almost all the play. Even when some characters in the plays do move about the stage, it is an aimless, nervous activity, not productive behavior. For example, Jerry's movement, his pacing around Peter's bench, resembles that of a caged animal. Mao wanders around the set and among the audience members in the play Box-Mao-Box, but his movements are as automatic and unvarying as the propaganda line that he mouths.

Some characters in the plays seem to lose their ability to move, as they become engrossed in the speech or action of another character.

So although withdrawal from a strange, disconcerting, unpleasant situation might seem to the uninvolved observer to be most reasonable, the characters are unable to act to leave. Jerry's strange words and behavior "achieve a hypnotic effect on Peter" (ZS, p.29), entrapping him and drawing him into Jerry's plan. The Intern and the Orderly are repeatedly drawn to the Nurse's desk and her abuse. Nick and Honey try at first to leave George and Martha's house, but their hosts insist that they stay. By the end of Act One, they themselves have become part of the games being played and are unable to leave. In the same way, Julia and Claire remain in the house in which the "plague" has arrived. These characters initially mirror the discomfiture of the audience members; however, like the audience members, they unintentionally but irrevocably are drawn into situations in which the potential for destruction increases in direct correlation to the increase in their inability to move or to make independent decisions.

When characters do move, most of their actions result only in an increase of pain for themselves or another character. The characters seem not to know how to make real human contact. They reach out desperately in any possible way, like the dog in The Zoo Story, but others fail to see that the apparent violence is the closest approximation to a loving gesture that some people can generate. All Jerry's actions are planned to teach to Peter a "good" lesson, which Peter does not wish to learn. Jerry's motives are basically kind, but his physical contact with Peter is disturbing and frightening to Peter. Jerry tickles, shoves, punches, and slaps Peter in an attempt to make contact, but Peter feels only the disturbance and pain. Peter's action consists of

his resistance to Jerry, his participation in the violent murder/suicide of Jerry, and his escape to increased mental anguish.

Action similarly appears to result in pain in other of Albee's plays. For example, Mommy and Daddy leave the living room of their apartment in The American Dream only in order to try to destroy Grandma's few remaining possessions. George is roused to few overt acts, but all are destructive ones, such as his "shooting" of Martha, his attempt to strangle her, and his repeated slaps which get her ready for the final round of battle in the third act of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. The only time Edna acts during her stay at the home of Tobias and Agnes is to slap Julia. In All Over, no one moves from his sitting, standing, or lying position except to inflict pain on someone else: first, as the Wife and Daughter each calmly walk across the room to exchange slaps, and, second, as the Daughter bursts into the room with photographers and reporters, forcing both the Wife and the Mistress into frantic, defensive attacks on the intruders.

Within the enclosed worlds of the plays, no character can move without affecting some other character in a disturbing way, as in Sartre's No Exit, and few characters seem capable of making a deliberate decision to leave the situation. Furthermore, no outsiders move into the restricted, static, stagnating space to bring relief or to provide a sense of proportion or perspective. Instead, the arrival of those from outside the enclosed area, such as Mrs. Barker and the "American Dream," Jack and Bessie, Nick and Honey, Edna and Harry, or the reporters in All Over, increases the tension within the room and directly helps to precipitate the climax of the play.

The predominant immobility--broken only by pacing, pushing, threatening, strangling, tickling, slapping, shooting, and stabbing--constitutes a parody of meaningful human physical action and contact, just as the empty and exploitive sexual relationships, the celibacy, and the implied homosexuality of Albee's characters are a parody of normal, heterosexual contact. No positive, healthy, meaningful sexual contact is achieved or shown in any of Albee's plays, even though sex is one of the major forces underlying the action of the plays. In Tiny Alice, for example, Act Two begins with a "love scene" between the Lawyer and Miss Alice, but it is a mockery of conventional, dramatic love scenes, with brutality on the Lawyer's part and passivity, fear, and loathing on the part of the female. In every instance, the characters' sexuality is repressed, perverted, misused, or frustrated, which points up and parallels the emptiness and distortion in all other areas of the characters' lives. The sexual contacts of Jerry in The Zoo Story epitomize this situation: He escapes his landlady's aggressive lust, which drives her repeatedly to trap him in the hallway, by saying, "[B]ut, Love; wasn't yesterday enough for you, and the day before?" Their sexual contact consists of an entrapment, a lie, and then the landlady's giggles and groans "as she thinks about yesterday and the day before; as she believes and relives what never happened." (ZS, p.28) Jerry's actual encounters are hardly more substantial, as he engages in a series of one-hour affairs with "the little ladies." His only satisfying experience with sex occurred when he was fifteen, when for a week and a half he was a homosexual: "I think I was very much in love . . . maybe just with sex. But that was the jazz of a very special hotel, wasn't it? And now;

oh, do I love the little ladies; really, I love them. For about an hour." (ZS, p.25)

The marriages shown in Albee's plays are habitual, joyless, atrophied interactions, reflecting the dishonest reasons for which they took place. This is most obvious in The American Dream, in which Grandma, with gleeful maliciousness, relates to Daddy Mommy's motivations for marriage to him:

> When she was no more than eight years old she used to climb up on to my lap and say, in a sickening little voice, "when I gwo up, I'm going to mahwy a wich old man; I'm going to set my wittle were end right down in a tub o' butter, that's what I'm going to do." (AD, p.69)

To Mommy, marriage is no more than a commercial transaction in which she bought the security of wealth and position with her sexuality. Mommy declares that she has won her right to "live off" Daddy and to have all his money when he dies because she used to let him "get on top of [her] and bump [his] uglies." (AD, p.67) Following his operation, however, Mommy no longer interests Daddy. Even the joyless, mutually exploitive and distasteful sexual relationship that Mommy and Daddy once had no longer exists:

> GRANDMA: You [Mommy] wanted me around so you could sleep in my room when Daddy got fresh. But now it isn't important, because Daddy doesn't want to get fresh with you anymore, and I don't blame him. You'd rather sleep with me, wouldn't you, Daddy?
> MOMMY: Daddy doesn't want to sleep with anyone. Daddy's been sick.
> DADDY: I've been sick. I don't even want to sleep in the apartment. (AD, p.70)

However, in a grotesque parody of the traditional assumptions about the roles and reactions of males and females, Daddy does "blush and giggle and [go] sticky wet" (AD, p.79) when Mrs. Barker strikes the stereotyped "cheesecake" pose and coyly moves the hem of her slip in

order to reveal her knee. In a similar way, middle-aged Mommy's sexual interest is aroused only by the arrival of the handsome, well-built young man who is the Hollywood paradigm of the physically attractive male. She "sidles up to him" and intimates more conversation "maybe later tonight." (AD, p.127)

Similarities exist between the marriage of Mommy and Daddy and those of the two couples in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. Nick, who resembles the "American Dream" boy physically, emotionally, and morally, and who thus is making plans to use his sexuality to improve his position of political and financial power by "plow[ing] a few pertinent wives" (VW, p.112), married Honey for her money. The two families had expected an eventual marriage between Nick and Honey, and Honey had an hysterical pregnancy: "She blew up, and then she went down" (VW, p.94); but, mostly, Nick was attracted by her father's wealth which consisted of "Godly money ripped from the golden teeth of the unfaithful, a pragmatic extension of the big dream." (VW, p.145) The deception underlying the marriage is sustained in the insincere, although almost obsequious, interactions between Nick and Honey. They maintain a rigid formality and distance in public that apparently continues into their private relationship, because when Martha suggests that their liaison would send Nick "back to [his] little wife all refreshed," he states with serious grimness, "She wouldn't know the difference." (VW, p.164)

Martha, like Mommy, has her sexual interest aroused only by the "undergraduates" (VW, p.208) and by her series of "crummy, totally pointless infidelities . . . would-be infidelities." (VW, p.189) George is the only man who has ever satisfied her sexually, but now, because love and hate, kindness and cruelty, and violence and tenderness

are so strongly and complexly intermixed in their relationship, George can interest Martha sexually only by a particularly vicious and well-executed move in their series of destructive games. Although both George and Martha imply that some kind of genuine love first drew them together, and may still exist, both also acknowledge that circumstances, as much as love and desire, effected their marriage. Martha explains that she was looking for a husband whom her father could groom for the future presidency of the college, and since George was "young . . . intelligent . . . and . . . bushy-tailed, and . . . sort of cute" and she "fell for him" (VW, p.81), she combined pragmatic politics with self-interest and married him. The example for the expedient marriages of both these couples was set much earlier, however, by the marriage of Martha's father to his second wife, "a very old lady with warts who was very rich" (VW, p.109). She lived only a short while after her marriage but left, "aside from some wart medicine," a will, leaving money for Martha's father, for his college, and for his daughter.

In the play Tiny Alice, Julian is married to Alice, through Miss Alice, for a myriad of complex and unexplained reasons; the only unambiguous reason for the marriage involves, as usual, money. Julian accepts the marriage as a form of religious sacrifice; but on a deeper level he desires the marriage and the sexual relationship because, in his mind, sex, religious ecstasy, sacrifice, and martyrdom are inextricable, as is demonstrated by his early dreams of martyrdom at the hands of gladiators or in the jaws of lions and by his hallucinations of sexual union with the woman in the asylum who thought herself to be the Virgin Mary.

Julia, the daughter of Tobias and Agnes in A Delicate Balance, marries for equally complex reasons and, consequently, finds comparable dissatisfaction. She seeks the same final satisfaction and transcendence that Julian desires, but hers takes the form of a desire to return to the irresponsible security of childhood, of a desire to "lay claim to the cave." (DB, p.100) She marries and separates four times: first, a compulsive gambler; second, a homosexual; third, a playboy; and fourth, a dissident who hates everything that she and her parents represent. Obviously, the marriages had no hope of fulfillment and continuation; it appears that she chooses, or has chosen for her, the most potentially unlikely partners, so that the marriages cannot last. Then, with unquestioned justification, she can return home to the security of her childhood room and to "the four-hour talk, the soothing racapitulation. . . . a pat on the hand, a gentle massage, [and her mother] slowly, slowly combing [her] hair." (DB, p.116)

Harry, in A Delicate Balance, verbalizes the emptiness and unhappiness of all the marriages between characters in Albee's plays:

> Edna and I . . . there's . . . so much . . . over the dam, so many . . . disappointments, evasions, I guess, lies maybe . . . so much we remember we wanted, once . . . so little that we've . . . settled for . . . we talk, sometimes, but mostly . . . no. We don't . . . "like." Oh, sure, we like . . . but I've always been a little shy--gruff, you know, and . . . shy. And Edna isn't . . . happy [. . .] . (VW, p.163)

Therefore, Edna and Harry take to separate beds, Agnes and Tobias take to separate rooms, and in All Over, Albee's latest play, the Husband and the Wife take to separate houses and separate lives. In the marriages that Albee depicts--based on material considerations, on meeting the expectations of a conformist society, on guilt and the

desire for self-punishment, and on all sorts of ulterior reasons, but never on selfless love and genuine concern--dissatisfaction is inevitable.

Because they are initiated and carried on for these same reasons, even the illicit sexual contacts of the characters are sad and unsatisfying. In each instance, one or both of the people involved are using the other person for ulterior purposes. The characters' sexuality is a ploy or a weapon. Even lust is not uncomplicated and spontaneous, and desire almost inevitably leads to frustration. In Who's Afraid of Virignia Woolf?, Martha uses Nick as her strongest weapon in her "total war" with George; and Nick, in his ambition to become a powerful "Inevitability," recognizes Martha as "the biggest goose in the gangle [sic]" (VW, p.114) and thus a necessary part of his climb to power. Martha cynically recognizes this fact:

> You're ambitious, aren't you, boy? You didn't chase me around the kitchen and up the goddamn stairs out of mad, driven passion, did you now? You were thinking a little bit about your career, weren't you? (VW, p.194)

However, Martha and Nick's calculated lust and manipulative desire result in frustration, furnishing no satisfaction for either of them on even the most basic physical level.

In the same way, the mutual desire of the Nurse and the Intern in The Death of Bessie Smith results only in the frustrating nightly ritual of "an infuriating and inconclusive wrestling match." (BS, p.61) Tobias, in A Delicate Balance, tried to use a brief affair with Claire to distract him from awareness of the meaninglessness of his life and the emptiness of his marriage, but neither he nor Claire takes any pleasure in recalling that summer long ago; nor do the Wife and the Best Friend see anything but a pathetic "mercy to each other" in their

"late summer . . . arrangement" (AO, p.32) which they recall in All Over. In each of these liasons, someone hopes to gain something: relief from loneliness, escape from awareness, power, or something else.

However, in two relationships described in the plays, the force behind the sexual contact is wholly negative. The most destructive relationships are those engaged in by the daughter of the Long-Winded Lady in Box-Mao-Box and by the daughter of the Wife in All Over. One calls her mother from the room in which she is staying with two very young Mexican boys, while the other lives with a brutal, corrupt married man. In both instances, it appears that the daughters choose relationships that will further demean themselves in their paradoxical efforts to punish themselves for their own ineffectuality and lovelessness; to spite their mothers, whose expectations they were unable to meet; and to make one last desperate plea to their mothers for a demonstration of love and concern. The daughters, at this advanced stage of alienation, are unable to make contact with their mothers in any positive way, but some kind of contact is absolutely necessary to them, even if it is based on hatred; so the daughters persist in their pathetic, degrading affairs.

As all these examples clearly illustrate, selfless love is rarely a factor in any of the sexual contacts among Albee's characters. Consequently, the interaction is emotionally unsatisfying and, in most cases, destructive to all the people involved. Significantly, most of the sexual contacts remain physically unproductive. Mommy and Daddy and George and Martha cannot have children, and Peter and his wife, as Jerry correctly guesses, are "not going to have any more kids." (ZS, p.16) Honey's fear of childbirth drives her to commit her "secret

little murders" (VW, p.177), while, in Tiny Alice, the woman in the asylum who believed that she was pregnant died of cancer of the womb. In A Delicate Balance, following the death of their only son, Tobias deliberately chooses to have no more children so he will not have to face the possibility of further pain and loss:

> AGNES: . . . I think it was a year, when you spilled on my belly, sir? "Please? Please, Tobias?" No, you wouldn't even say it out: I don't want another child, another loss. "Please; Please, Tobias?" And guiding you, trying to hold you in? [. . .] Don't leave me then, like that. Not again, Tobias. Please? I can take care of it; we won't have another child, but please don't . . . leave me like that . . . such . . . silent . . . sad, disgusted . . . love. (DB, p. 143)

Daughters marry and have affairs but remain childless. The only son to appear in the plays, in All Over, is a fifty-two-year-old, weak, and insignificant person whose futility is already taken for granted by all the other characters. He has never married and has produced no children. This, the Wife comments, is best, since now the line will end at its zenith.

Therefore, no children are born to carry on the line. In none of the sexual relationships depicted by Albee is the egotism of sexual desire transformed into the sacrifice of unambiguous, selfless love, with the symbolic embodiment of that sacrifice in the form of a child. Sex remains divorced from love in Albee's plays; thus, the transformation does not take place. When this situation exists, "sex seeks other outlets, searches for excitement, gratifies the normal desire for self-sacrifice in all kinds of perversions,"[18] repressions, and forms of self-punishment. As presented in Albee's plays, sexual relationships, and the results of those relationships, constitute a parody of human sexual contact that is based on love or even genuine desire.

Similarly, the "games" played among the characters in Albee's plays constitute a parody of honest, positive interpersonal activity. As compensatory activity, the games fill the void in the lives of the participants. They substitute for satisfying, intimate interactions based on friendship or love and are clearly differentiated from other activity by their ulterior quality and their destructive "payoff" for one or more of the players. Eric Berne, author of Games People Play, defines a game as "a recurring set of transactions, often repetitous, superficially plausible, with a concealed motivation; or more colloquially, a series of moves with a snare or 'gimmick.' . . . Every game . . . is basically dishonest, and the outcome has a dramatic, as distinct from merely exciting, quality."[19] Much of the action in Albee's plays consists of game playing by the characters. In each game there is a winner and a loser. Audience interest is created and held by the resulting suspense as one attempts to determine who will win and how he will win. The suspense generated by Albee's plays is "true" suspense, because it usually is impossible to predict, at the beginning of one of Albee's plays, what the outcome of the characters' game-playing interactions will be. A player may not consciously be aware that he is engaging in a particular series of circuitous transactions in order to attain specific results, or, as Jerry in The Zoo Story puts it, that he is going "a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly" (ZS, p.21). But this fact does not mitigate the intensity with which he acts or the possible seriousness of the game and its consequences: As Jerry sits on Peter's bench, dying of a knife wound, he asks, ". . . could I have planned all this? No . . . no, I couldn't have. But I think I did." (ZS, p. 48)

A knowledge of game theory and an awareness of the predominance of inauthentic responses that occur in game-playing help one perceive and understand the patterns of character-interaction that recur in Albee's plays. Some characters such as Peter, Julian, and Nick and Honey at first try to keep the encounters on the level of pastimes, that is, "semi-ritualistic, simple, complementary transactions"[20] that are candid but superficial and may involve some contest or competitiveness but no serious threat or conflict. However, the remaining characters in Albee's plays, with the exception of those in Box-Mao-Box, consistently play second and finally third-degree games, engaging in a series of circuitous, repetitive, spiraling interactions that gradually increase in intensity and violence, leading to a climax of destruction or self-destruction--the snare or the payoff--for one or more of the players. Within Albee's plays, characters repeatedly use the same kinds of transactions: variations on the same stories, set speeches, accusations, arguments, and confessionals. They skillfully play complex, sophisticated forms of the life, marital, party, and sexual games outlined by Berne.

Martha's soliloquy at the beginning of the third act of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? points up the vicious circularity of this kind of game-playing which is repeatedly used by the characters in that play[21]:

> I cry allll the time; but deep inside, so no one can see me. I cry all the time. And Georgie cries all the time, too. We both cry all the time, and then, what we do, we cry, and take our tears, and we put'em in the ice box, in the goddamn ice trays until they're all frozen and then . . . we put them . . . in our . . . drinks. (VW, pp. 185-186)

As Martha's words imply, the loneliness and need of the characters make them desire contact, but they also fear the possible pain of real relationships, so they settle for the dishonest form of contact that games can provide. The futility, frustration, and dissatisfaction that result from that misdirected energy and creativity create the tears that will become the impetus for increased loneliness, more destructive games, and, hence, new tears.

The reader feels that the characters in Albee's plays have gone through the same words and actions many times before, except that this time the words and actions that constitute the game have moved to the third level of intensity, where consequences become absolute and irrevocable. At the third level, the specific game being played must eventually be ended in some way; the players cannot stop in mid-game or resume the game on a lower level at some later point in time. Therefore, Albee's plays follow the pattern of a third-degree game. They build either to physcial violence or to a highly emotional speech in which a character verbalizes the real pain and disgust that he feels in the face of existence; both frequently are accompanied by a literal or symbolic death.

For example, in The Zoo Story, Jerry makes his desperate and poignant plea for understanding in "The Story of Jerry and the Dog," begins to attack Peter with increasing verbal and physical violence, and eventually impales himself on a knife held in Peter's unwilling hand. In The Death of Bessie Smith, the Nurse's verbal exchanges with the Intern and the Orderly increase in tension and hostility, culminating in her speech asserting her disgust with "everything in this hot, stupid, fly-ridden world. [. . .] I WANT OUT!" (BS, pp.70-71) Almost

immediately the discovery is made that, through neglect and injustice, Bessie Smith has been allowed to bleed to death. In The American Dream, absurdity builds upon absurdity until the Young Man, a parody of what the ideals that originally constituted the "American Dream" have now become, tells of his disfigurement and dehumanization; immediately thereafter, Grandma leaves with the mysterious Van Man. In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, following the "Fun and Games" of Act One and the "Walpurgisnacht" of Act Two, emotion and action are most intense in the third act "Exorcism" as George's recitation of the Requiem Mass alternates with Martha's hysterical pleas and protests following his announcement of the death of their son. Julian's death speech at the end of Tiny Alice is comparable in impact and intensity; it is the culmination of a long, indirect series of ambiguous and complicated actions and exchanges which gradually increase in violence. But as Julian's death occurs, silence and darkness replace the pounding heartbeats and the ominous shadows. In A Delicate Balance, the bitterness and sad regret of all the characters become progressively more overt, building to Tobias's "aria" at the end of Act Three and the departure of Edna and Harry, who take with them as they leave any hope for genuine relationships which would give meaning to the lives of Agnes and Tobias. Their departure is the death of hope for themselves and for the other characters. Finally, in All Over, the bickering, regrets, recriminations, attacks, and self-indulgent confessions among the characters who await the death of the Husband increase in hysterical intensity until the final announcement that it is "all over."

A few characters such as the Intern, George and Martha, and Julian may have been so deeply shocked or hurt--emotionally and/or physically--

that games become irrelevant and insufficient for coping with the extremity of the situation. They all have gone through the symbolic game of "peel-the-label" and have reached "the marrow . . . and that's what you gotta get at." (VW, p.213) Consequently, Martha and George speak in monosyllabic questions and answers that admit their real fear of life without games and illusions and their acute awareness of the emptiness of their lives without their "beanbag" at the end of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, a title which means, according to Albee, "Who's afraid of life without illusions?" The Intern leaves the hospital in which he had been entrapped by his own fears; and Julian's dying words acknowledge his acceptance of "Alice." These characters, and possibly Nick and Honey, may have gained sufficient insight from the situation to choose to accept reality and to leave games and dishonesty behind. On the other hand, other characters such as Peter, Mommy, Daddy, the Nurse, the Orderly, and all the characters in A Delicate Balance, Box-Mao-Box, and All Over apparently react to what they have seen, heard, and been a part of by retreating even further into a world of inauthentic reactions and self-deceit. As Berne states, only a few fortunate people seem to be able to go beyond games to achieve awareness, spontaneity, and intimacy; and since "all three of these may be frightening and even perilous to the unprepared,"[22] many people deliberately choose to continue to live in a way that is a destructive perversion and a parody of meaningful human interaction.

Although, as George ironically states in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, self or socially imposed isolation, compromise, "accommodation, malleability, [and] adjustment . . . do seem to be in the order of things" (VW, p.102) for Albee's characters, and although the characters

may choose to remain in the illusory safety of the cave or the womb and may appear to prefer withdrawal, games, roles, and disguises, the most significant common trait among Albee's characters is dissatisfaction with their lives. From Jerry and Peter on, the characters are seeking something; none are contented or satisfied. They want or lack (two recurring words in the vocabulary of Albee's characters) escape, contact, confirmation, reassurance, material success, meaning, love, or some kind of "satisfaction." However, many of them are trying to "get satisfaction" from the wrong things in the wrong ways. Thus, Mommy and Daddy wait, in The American Dream, for the satisfaction of getting their ice box, their doorbell, and the leak in their johnny fixed. They also want a new "bumble of joy" to replace their earlier defective one. At the end of the play, when all the characters' material desires are fulfilled, when "everybody's got what he thinks he wants" (AD, p.127), they drink "To satisfaction! Who says you can't get satisfaction these days." (AD, p.126) In The Death of Bessie Smith, the Nurse seeks a return to the attitudes and behavior of the past, the Intern wants to care for the wounded in the Spanish Civil War, and Jack and Bessie and the Orderly want to get to the "North," where, in the Nurse's derisive words, "nobody's any better than anybody else." (BS, p.47) All seek to escape to another time or place in which they think their needs and desires will automatically be fulfilled. None admits that simple escape is impossible, that there is no "place" where one can find ready-made, personal freedom or authentic imposed meaning for his life. Peter retreats into middle-class conformity; Julian looks for satisfaction and meaning in religious obedience and sacrifice; the characters in

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? and A Delicate Balance try to fill the emptiness of their lives by drinking, promiscuity, and game-playing.

In seeking satisfaction, some characters even try to force contact and communication, the futility of which is best illustrated in "The Story of Jerry and the Dog" and in Tobias's story, "The cat that I had." Each man's story reflects the methods he used in seeking to find and maintain a relationship supposedly based on love. Within the stories and the plays, the two men try to force contact with another character, but both Jerry and Tobias learn that human love, like dogs and cats, cannot be forced. It must be carefully nurtured and encouraged and protected, and it can never be taken for granted, but coercion simply is a concept that is alien to the concept of genuine human relationships.

The fact that all the characters are in some way dissatisfied and are desperately searching to fill the void in their own lives and, thus, that their actions can never be seen as pure, selfless gestures undercuts the idea that any of the characters are to be seen as unequivocal sacrificial or "saviour" figures. Albee's characters are far too complex and self-contradictory to fill any one-dimensional role in the plays. In fact, some of the characters who effect the release and thus the "salvation" of other characters, such as the Nurse in The Death of Bessie Smith or the Lawyer in Tiny Alice, are very negative characters with few or no heroic qualities, who indirectly or accidentally force other characters to react because of that very negativity. Although Jerry, Grandma, and George frequently have been interpreted as straightforward "saviour" figures who make great sacrifices in order to enlighten other characters, and although Julian frequently is seen

as an "innocent" who is sacrificed, even martyred, because of his inability to understand or withstand the forces of evil, one must recognize that their roles in the plays are far more complex.

For example, Jerry is far more sensitive and sympathetic than Peter, but he is neither simply a "misunderstood waif" nor a Christ-figure. Jerry is very eccentric, occasionally hostile, and overly defensive. To a stranger, he asks rude and apparently unreasonable questions, does not listen to many of the replies, is curt in his own responses, and does not explain himself. He is not kind to his pathetic landlady and attempts no offer of help to the tenants who share his roominghouse. In his desperation to fulfill his own needs, he fails to see that Peter also is suffering. Consequently, there is double irony in his question to Peter: "Don't you have any idea, not even the slightest, what other people need?" (ZS, p.45) If his interaction with Peter is an attempt at combining cruelty and kindness to create the "teaching emotion," the kindness is hardly visible. Jerry wants Peter to respond to him in a particular way; since Peter does not, or cannot, meet Jerry's needs willingly and spontaneously, Jerry proceeds, in a sense, to punish him. The dissonance within Jerry's own life has not been resolved, so his ostensibly sacrificial gesture cannot be motivated solely by concern for Peter. His self-sacrifice, in order to pass on a new awareness of life to Peter, reeks of a desire to escape a meaningless life by a death that appears to have meaning. Jerry forces Peter to make contact with another human being, and Jerry is comforted: "Peter . . . thank you. I came unto you and you have comforted me. Dear Peter." (ZS, p.48) He seems to think, as well, that he has passed on his message; but the play provides no evidence of any new moral or metaphysical

awareness in Peter. The larger interaction between Peter and Jerry has been enacted in miniature in the parable of Jerry and the dog, and all that is gained is further loss. Similarly, Peter's only observable gains are increases in fright, frustration, perplexity, and guilt. For Peter, the parable concludes in despair, not salvation.

Grandma, like Jerry, frequently is taken to be a wholly admirable character whose attitudes and behavior are set forth by Albee as standards for the audience member, but this evaluation of Grandma is overly simplistic. She does represent the last of an energetic, enterprising, but vanishing generation, and she does represent the past and "the epoch of the still-dynamic national ethic and vision."[23] However, she does not represent infallible, rejected wisdom, for she has both the virtues and the vices of the "old pioneer stock" of which she is a part. She is commonsensical, pragmatic, forthright, and compassionate to the Young Man, but she also is cunning, rudely blunt, acquisitive, and uncompassionate towards her daughter. In fact, Mommy seems to be simply an extreme version of Grandma. Grandma's ostensibly sacrificial gesture, her leaving at the end of the play to allow her place to be taken by the Young Man, the "American Dream" which promises "satisfaction" to Mommy and Daddy, has a sardonic aspect to it, because she is the only character who is aware of what the dream once might have been but who recognizes its present hollowness and corruption.

In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, George is frequently interpreted as a saviour figure, as a wise, almost omniscient and omnipotent character, who determines the need for and then effects the enlightenment of all the other characters. However, the destructive games that have

resulted in their present state of unhappiness could not have continued if one person had chosen not to play; but George is as involved in the games as Martha is, and he plays as intensely and as well as Martha does. As the loser of the first round of games, he is seeking revenge. By mere chance, a fluke--because he throws his book at the door chimes in his rage and despair, causing them to ring, and because Honey hears them and, in her drunkenness, mistakes the ring for that of a caller at the door--he devises the ultimate revenge against Martha, the death of their dream-son on the eve of the son's twenty-first birthday. This he carries out with the consummate skill of the gamesman that he is. He both loses and gains exactly as much as Martha does through his action that destroys their illusions.

Thus, one sees that Albee provides no characters with one-dimensional roles or unambiguous motivations. All the characters are dissatisfied; none have easy, "right" answers or solutions to their state of dissatisfaction. They desire contact but do not know how to achieve it. Underneath the surface of bitterness, pettiness, frustration, and disgust is a strong desire for tenderness and love. Under the apathy and cynicism is vulnerability. However, none of the characters are honest and straightforward with themselves or others except in moments of extreme desperation, and then it is usually too late. The characters' words and actions usually contradict their real desires and needs in the same way that they conflict with the characters' assigned roles. As well, the words and actions may contradict each other, and both may belie the truth. And without honesty, fulfillment of the characters' "lacks" and "wants" is impossible.

In the chronological development of Albee's plays, there is a pattern of decline in hope for the characters' eventual attainment of honest interaction and the resulting fulfillment. In several of the plays, the presence of a strong, vital, independent figure from an earlier generation, such as Bessie Smith, Grandma, Martha's father, or the Husband in All Over, pervades the onstage action and functions as an ironic contrast to the misdirected, wasted energy of the present generation of Mommies and Daddies and to the total emptiness and ineffectuality of the future generation. This pattern within the plays of a reduction in vitality, self-sufficiency, and a sense of purpose from one generation of characters to the next is only one of the patterns that emerge from Albee's plays and create progressively less optimism about the characters' possible attainment of satisfaction. The plays have less and less physical action and become more purely verbal; and since words are shown to be almost worthless in achieving contact and communication among human beings, the progressive decrease in movement among the characters means that virtually no contact will be possible. In Box-Mao-Box and All Over, Albee's most recent works, the characters are practically immobile throughout the plays.

The advancing age of the characters also points to the unlikelihood of change. In Zoo Story, both Jerry, in his late thirties, and Peter, in his early forties but looking younger, are relatively young, as are the main characters in The Death of Bessie Smith. In The American Dream and The Sandbox, Mommy, Daddy, and Mrs. Barker are middle-aged, as are both Martha (fifty-two years old) and George (forty-six years old). According to Albee's statement to John Gielgud, for whom he wrote the part of Julian, all the characters in Tiny Alice are supposed to be in

their fifties. In A Delicate Balance, the ages of Agnes, Tobias, Harry, Edna, and Claire range from fifty to the early sixties; in Box-Mao-Box, the characters are older, from sixty to eighty, as are most of the characters in All Over. The ages of the members of the younger generation, the hope for the future, also increase--from the handsome Young Man of twenty-five in The Sandbox and The American Dream, through Nick (thirty, although he tells George he is twenty-eight) and Honey (twenty-six) and Julia (thirty-six), to the Daughter (forty-five) and the Son (fifty-two) in All Over. The average age of the characters advances from approximately thirty-five years old in The Zoo Story to sixty-five years old in All Over. The decrease in vitality and hope for change emphasized by the advancing ages of the characters is also emphasized in the decreasing individuation of the characters. There is only one specific name for a character, Mao, in Box-Mao-Box, and there are none in All Over. The plays become starker in their settings, more dissonant, more verbal, and less frequently mitigated by humor, even black, sardonic humor.

Nonetheless, although there is a pattern developing of less hope within the characters and less hope for them, Albee's plays are not fatalistic or nihilistic. The strong, vivid statements of the growing evil of the present situation of mankind is an attempt to force awareness and a desire for change, before it is too late; it is an attempt to forestall the fate of Tobias or of the characters in All Over. The parodies of recognizable types of people in contemporary society and of their actions and interactions are an attempt to stimulate audience members to self-awareness and change, not to despair. One's difficulty in identifying with the complex, contradictory characters is to serve a positive purpose. At first one may attempt identification

as usual with a character in one of Albee's plays, but as the play develops one becomes progressively more wary because even the seemingly "good" characters are being undercut and exposed. Irony underlies the development of even the most sympathetic characters; all must be judged. No one-dimensional heroes or villains can exist in Albee's plays. Of course, within the context of the plays, some characters seem to respond to a situation better than others, but no character unambiguously represents the accurate or authentic response to a situation, just as no easy scapegoat is provided.

Consequently, characters such as the Nurse in The Death of Bessie Smith, Mommy, or the Lawyer in Tiny Alice are not presented as the source of the evil that infects their lives and poisons their relationships with other people; instead, they are finally seen as pathetic, sick products of sick environments, as victims as much as victimizers. Even the "Destructive Woman"[24] character (including Mommy, the Nurse, Martha, Agnes, Alice, the Wife and the Daughter), whose power to cause pain and destruction is almost limitless, is finally seen to deserve compassion as well as censure:

> From her inner constriction and the spite that this begets, she mocks and terrorizes the . . . men; and she does this because she is too weak to fight her way out of the impasse of her life. She insists on accepting the constraints the community imposes. Her dominance over the men embodies the environment's stranglehold on all of them. But just this power maims her as well as her victims; underneath the grinning grimness of her will she is consumed by self-abomination.[25]

The Nurse says, "I am tired of my skin . . . I WANT OUT!" (BS, p.71), and the paradox of the women's destructiveness is epitomized in Martha's admission: "I disgust me." (VW, p.189) In the same way, the apparently innocent characters such as the "American Dream" boy and Julian and those other characters who seem to be trying somehow to change their

bad situations such as Jerry, the Orderly, and Tobias are never wholly free from culpability: "The bad guys elude all attempts at labeling; and the good guys emerge as monstrous frauds."[26]

Therefore, with a vivid, and sometimes shocking, presentation of complicated characters who exist in complexly problematic situations, but with no presentation of the "right" or "wrong" ways of dealing with the situation, the audience member is required to react independently. The norms for evaluating the behavior of the characters must come from within the mind of the reader or audience member. He must determine for himself who is worthy of respect and emulation and which kinds of people, attitudes, and behavior deserve real criticism and attack outside the theatre situation. The dissonance that is created in the mind of the audience member by Albee's method of characterization is not a sign of the aesthetic incompleteness of the play. It is, instead, a sign of Albee's ability to create characters who do not fit into any one stereotyped category and who must be analyzed in order to be completely understood.

Chapter Three: Language

The paradoxes and parodies that epitomize Albee's settings and character creation also continue in his use of language and creation of dramatic dialogue. In Dialogue in American Drama, a quite comprehensive survey of the use of language by modern American writers of drama, Ruby Cohn concludes her discussion of Edward Albee's language with the assertion that he is "the most skillful composer of dialogue that America has produced."[1] One's awareness of the cumulative influence on Albee's style of the language of Strindberg, Pirandello, Eliot, Ionesco, Beckett, Genet, Coward, Tennessee Williams, Pinter, and other major modern playwrights does not diminish one's awareness of the distinctiveness of Albee's dialogue. The verbal skill that Albee possesses and demonstrates is, in some ways, ironic, because some of the most significant and consistent thematic concerns of his plays are with the inability or unwillingness of modern man to communicate and with the failure of language, that is, the ineffectuality of words themselves to convey meaning.

Writing from this point in time, Albee has a choice of several different ways of dealing with this idea dramatically. First, he has the example of the playwrights in the Aristotelian tradition, such as Ibsen, Shaw, and Miller, who perceive the drama as a verbal, rational artistic medium in which one presents the problem and creates characters who represent varying ways of responding to the problem and

who engage in dialectics concerning the problem. Albee also has the Artaudian example of disregarding language altogether and attempting to shock his audience into awareness through visual images and incantations, and he has the example of the writers of the "Theatre of the Absurd," who show the absurdity and ineffectuality of language by creating absurd, disjunctive, and ineffectual dialogue, as in Ionesco's The Bald Soprano. Albee's reaction has been to combine all three approaches, developing a unique, if eclectic, style. Albee's demonstration of his concern for the failure of contact and communication increases the cognitive dissonance in the minds of the audience members because he does not create characters, such as some of those of Beckett, who have lost the ability to speak coherently; instead, most of Albee's characters demonstrate remarkable verbal skill.

The audience member is almost inevitably caught up in the virtuosity and abundance of Albee's dramatic dialogue which ranges from the highest to the lowest styles--from Jamesian precision and refinement to unmitigated obscenities to farce and melodrama--in his skillful juxtaposition of the most diverse kinds of language: "cliché with pompous rhetoric, slang with archaic formality, hysterical fluency with monosyllabic exhaustion."[2] The characters' quick repartee, puns, clichés, stories, double entendres, clever or heavy-handed insults, slang, dialects, repetitions, and general word-play combine to create carefully orchestrated conversations that focus the audience's attention on the language.

Albee's characters directly call further attention to the mechanisms of language and to their use and manipulation of that language as they define their terms, conjugate their verbs, and

quibble over the most proper use of words, and as they modify, paraphrase, correct, and improvise on each other's words and phrases. Many of the characters are quite conscious, and self-conscious, of the formulation and verbalization of their thoughts in precise words, images, and syntax. Whether Albee's characters are engaged in quick and forceful thrust-and-parry exchanges, in the relation of seemingly irrelevant and absurd stories, in beautifully constructed speeches, or in intense, complex monologues that reveal their deepest fears, the audience member is almost inevitably fascinated, at first, by the powerful, colorful language spoken by those characters.

However, a disquieting awareness about the language begins slowly to develop as the audience member realizes that the surface or form of the brilliant language is all that there is. Albee pushes words as far as they will go--his characters stretch the limits of their vocabularies and their inventiveness--in order to expose what, if anything, lies beneath the words; and one, if he listens perceptively, is eventually forced to conclude that the language of the characters is as empty of communication as the lives of the characters are of meaning. It is form without content, and the excessive concern of many of the characters for the structure of their language is a device to attempt to cover and compensate for the loss. In general, the words of the characters do not fulfill the most basic requirements of effective language in establishing communication, that is, in effecting the exchange of meaningful information between human beings. Furthermore, language is ineffectual in helping the characters determine the difference between truth and lies or reality and illusions. Because words can relay an untruth as easily as they can transmit truth, words

fail to give a character assurance that he knows about other people and his world. The characters realize that their words "no longer behave as denotative and connotative indices"[3] and, thus, that their words are inadequate to elicit understanding; so they usually attempt to compensate by increasing the virtuosity, intensity, and quantity of their language. As Arthur K. Oberg explains in his article "Edward Albee: His Language and Imagination," mere dialogue is never assured of effectiveness in communicating, so it "attempts to surround what it would control, seeking victory in its copia and in an intensity which is related to this abundance."[4] For Albee's characters, words seem to retain assured power only in their infinite capacity to cause pain.

Albee's plays are "all talk," but little positive communication results among the characters. Absorbed in their individual desires, needs, problems, and sorrows, the characters withdraw emotionally from other people; with rare exceptions, these isolated characters try to fill their empty lives with compensatory diversions, and talk is one of these. The characters speak "at" one another in a non-sequential and non-consequential manner, indulge in vocalized free association--"exercising" and "walking what's left of [their] wits" (VW, pp.33,34)--and both manipulate others and are themselves controlled by their language. The characters--many of whom get their vocabularies from television (AD, p.89), their ideas from Book Club selections (AD, p.65), and their facts from Time Magazine (ZS, p.13)--nonetheless hope that someone will hear the desperate plea for acknowledgement of their existence, worth, and need that lies at the center of all the endless, frequently cruel, talk. However, their hope is usually futile. Instead, one realizes that all this well articulated non-communication, no matter

how brilliant and forceful, is indeed a parody of the real intent and workings of a language system. And, as in the other cases of deliberate parody by Albee, the intent is serious. Albee imaginatively tries to force the audience member to recognize the emptiness and/or habitual mindlessness of the language that the characters speak, which is contemporary, colloquial, stylized dialogue that includes not only the vocabulary and syntax, but especially the rhythm, of modern American idiom. Since this also is the language of the audience member, he is forced to examine the vitality and effectiveness of his own language as well.

Albee's dialogue is unequivocably colloquial while being, simultaneously, highly artificial; it is language that is not exactly that which is used by real people, but it is "very much like" it, with distortions and exaggerations that increase its intensity. One of the best examples of Albee's creation of heightened colloquial language that is typically modern American, yet distinctly in his own style, appears in his first play, The Zoo Story, in Jerry's explanation of his family background:

> But good old Mom and good old Pop are dead . . . you know? . . . I'm broken up about it, too . . . I mean really. BUT. That particular vaudeville act is playing the cloud circuit now, so I don't see how I can look at them, all neat and framed. Besides, or, rather, to be pointed about it, good old Mom walked out on good old Pop when I was ten and a half years old; she embarked on an adulterous turn of our southern states . . . a journey of a year's duration . . . and her most constant companion . . . among others, among many others . . . was a Mr. Barleycorn. (ZS, p.24)

He continues to explain that his good old Mom "parted with the ghost in some dump in Alabama," and, as a "northern stiff," she was somewhat less welcome. Soon thereafter, his good old Pop "slapped into the

front of a somewhat moving city omnibus," and that "sort of cleaned things out family-wise." To this slangy, breezy, yet poignant narrative that is both idiomatic and imaginative, Peter's only response is "Oh, my; oh,my" (ZS, p.24), since he cannot or will not acknowledge and react to the loneliness being transmitted.

In keeping with the verbal freedom that began to develop in the United States during the mid-1960's, the language of Albee's characters began to mirror the explicitness that increasingly became the norm. In fact, the first words of his play Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? set the tone for the idiomatic language that follows throughout the play. The Act One stage lights come up simultaneously with Martha's loud exclamation: "Jesus H. Christ." (VW, p.13) By 1971, in his most recent play All Over, the language of his characters reflects the further move towards an almost total elimination of verbal taboos. In this play, a seventy-one-year-old matron, the most refined and respectable character, refers to "fucking--as it is called in public by everyone these days." (AO, p.32) As this speech indicates, the use of slang terminology by Albee's characters does become more self-conscious in the later plays. In A Delicate Balance, for instance, nearly every use of slang is accompanied by the almost apologetic explanatory phrase, "as they say"; nonetheless, the characters continue to use highly idiomatic, highly contemporary expressions. Therefore, the language that appears in all Albee's plays is, in general, that which is used "by everyone these days"--self-ironic, cliché-ridden, effecting a strange combination of directness and diffusion, and moving towards monologue--and analysis and evaluation of that language is immediately relevant to the lives of the audience members.

Characters within the plays encourage the analysis and evaluation of their language by repeatedly calling attention to their language usage and to their verbal skill or lack of skill. Compounding the other differences between Jerry and Peter in The Zoo Story is the difference in their levels of articulacy. Jerry speaks forcefully, if indirectly, and states that "I don't talk to many people . . . But every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk; like to get to know somebody, know all about him." (ZS, p.17) Peter on the other hand, announces his inarticulacy: "I'm . . . I'm normally . . . uh . . . reticent." (ZS, p.19) His speech is characterized by hesitations (indicated by the many ellipsis marks that punctuate his dialogue), by the many "uh's" that interrupt his flow of words, and by his many unfinished sentences. Peter attempts to turn his inability or disinclination to make verbal contact into a joke: "I . . . I don't express myself too well, sometimes. I'm in publishing, not writing." (ZS, p.20) However, Jerry is determined that contact will be made and refuses to allow Peter to find refuge in his usual non-committal inanities and cliché-ridden speech.

In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, both George and Martha acknowledge each other's verbal ability in words that also imply their dislike of their purely destructive, purely verbal interactions: Martha says to George, "[Y]ou never do anything [. . .] . You just sit around and talk" (VW, p.7); and George correctly explains Martha's verbal ability to Nick and Honey: "Martha's a devil with language; she really is." (VW, p.21) Julian, in Tiny Alice, asserts that his fluency is deliberate: "Articulate men often carry set paragraphs"

(TA, p.116); and the Lawyer accurately describes and demonstrates his characteristic use of language with his assertion, "I speak plainly." (TA, p.7) Agnes, in A Delicate Balance, sarcastically apologizes for the force and precision of her verbal attacks: "If I scold, it is because I wish I needn't. If I am sharp, it is because I am neither less nor more than human, and if I am to be accused of making too much of things, let me remind you that it is my manner and not the matter. I apologize for being articulate." (DB, p.23) Comparably, both Grandma and Mommy in The American Dream are conscious of the skill with which they engage in the verbal contest that continues between them:

> MOMMY: Nonsense. Old people have nothing to say; and if old people did have something to say, nobody would listen to them. (To Grandma) You see? I can pull that stuff just as easy as you can.
> GRANDMA: Well, you got the rhythm, but you don't really have the quality. [. . .] Look. I'll show you how it's really done. [. . .] You see? Rhythm and content. You'll learn. (AD, pp.85-86)

In the same way, Nick--although unable to compete in verbal games on the same level with Martha and George--asserts his awareness of the power of language:

> All right . . . what do you want me to say? Do you want me to say it's funny, so you can contradict me and say it's sad? Or do you want me to say it's sad so you can turn around and say no, it's funny. You can play that damn little game anyway you want to, you know. (VW, p.33)

All these characters express self-awareness and an awareness of the uses to which language can be put, and as Arthur K. Moberg states, "After such knowledge there can be neither forgiveness nor regret."[5]

In the same way that the characters acknowledge their articulacy or inarticulacy and thus draw attention to their words, they call further attention through all their varied talk about "talking." As

noted earlier, Jerry asserts his intention to "really talk" to Peter, and he straightforwardly asks, "Do you mind if I ask you questions?" (ZS, p.17) He entices Peter to stay by promising to tell him stories: "Because after I tell you about the dog, do you know what then? Then . . . then I'll tell you about what happened at the zoo." (ZS, p.29) In The Death of Bessie Smith, the Nurse's vitriolic abuse of the Negro Orderly begins when he uses words that she does not understand and phrases that are beyond her ability to comprehend. He speaks in a far more refined and educated manner than the Nurse does; in conversation with the Nurse, he uses the words "voyeur," "contempt," and "condone," and the phrase "it's a matter of proportion." Her response to his intellectual superiority, as evidenced by his verbal ability, is to attack him in the most devastating and brutal way possible, by reminding him that his educated "talk" will be of no use to him as a "nigger" in a white, racist society:

> Condone! Will you listen to that: condone! My! Aren't you the educated one? What . . . what does that word mean, boy? That word condone? Hunh? You do talk some, don't you? [But] You have a great deal to learn. (BS, p.41)

She also attacks the Intern for his talk of going to Spain, and she brings up the subjects of talking to the Mayor in order to gain political favors and of the emptiness of "promises" that are all talk.

Similarly, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is filled with characters' references to their own language. The characters in that play seem to have existence only on a verbal level, and they consistently call attention to the language of the play in various ways. For example, Honey repeatedly covers her ears with her hands and rejects "such language" (VW, p.69) as is spoken by the three other characters. George accuses

Martha of being "obsessed" with a particularly ugly phrase, and he asserts that "college-types" like themselves should know innumerable complex verbal games to play since the existing games cannot possibly be "the limit of [their] vocabulary." (VW, p.139) As the games increase in intensity and destructiveness, Nick threatens George that he will begin to play "in your language." (VW, p.150) However, talk about talking is most frequent and insistent in Scene One, Act One of Tiny Alice; words and phrases such as "talk," "address," "conversation," "gibberish," "small talk," "talking business," "say," "speak," "call," "discuss," "whispered," and "interview" recur more than forty times as the Lawyer and the Cardinal, accomplished verbal duelists, set the tone for the words and action that are to follow.

Further attention is drawn to language, as language, when the characters correct their own speech or that of others, quibble over words, make up terms, define, modify, and conjugate their words, and engage in many varied forms of word-play. In The American Dream, only Grandma and Mrs. Barker discuss the relative correctness of the words "bundle" and "bumble":

> MRS. BARKER: A what?
> GRANDMA: A bumble; a bumble of joy.
> MRS. BARKER: Oh, like bundle.
> GRANDMA: Well, yes; very much like it. Bundle, bumble; who cares? (AD, pp.97-98)

However, in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, all of the characters correct each other's use of nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. Nick corrects George's use of "chromozones" to "chromosomes" (VW, p.37) and makes the distinction for Martha between the words "microphone" and "microscope" (VW, p.192). Honey corrects Martha's use of the word "good" as an adverb (VW, p.72), and she innocently

makes a telling observation when she insists on the correct gender in the use of the word "Floozie":

> GEORGE: Tut, tut, tut.
> MARTHA: Tut, tut yourself . . . you old floozie!
> HONEY: He's not a floozie . . . . he can't be a floozie . . . you're a floozie.
> MARTHA: (Shaking a finger at HONEY) Now you watch yourself! (VW, pp.73-74)

But it is George, with the most fully developed and refined verbal repertoire, who makes the most corrections, as he points out the proper term in all the following sets of words: "something" and "somebody," "pagan" and "atheist," "gangle" and "gaggle," "got" and "gotten," "bongs" and "chimes," "abstruse" and "abstract," "him" and "it," and "my" and "our."

The Lawyer in Tiny Alice, who is nearly comparable to George in verbal acuity, distinguishes between a "bequest" and a "grant" for Julian; and he asserts that "There's no such word as screep," a word which Julian thinks "has a nice onomatopoetic ring about it." (TA, p.34) Tobias, in A Delicate Balance, asserts that the grim seriousness of Agnes's words changes the "epigram," "One does not apologize to those for whom one must,' into an "aphorism" (DB, p.18); Agnes distinguishes between the adjectives "instinctive" and "reflex" in order to correctly describe Tobias's defense of Claire (DB, p.17); and Claire, in her turn, firmly corrects Tobias's use of articles when discussing her drinking. The proper usage, she asserts, is "a" alcoholic, not "an" alcoholic. (DB, p.34) Agnes's cool correction of Tobias, when he answers her question about Julia's behavior by stating that Julia is "in hysterics," very clearly indicates the level of withdrawal and impersonality that Agnes has achieved:

AGNES: (Controlled) What, what was she doing, Tobias?
TOBIAS: I told you! She's in hysterics!
AGNES: (Tight smile) That is a condition; I inquired about an action. (DB, p.113)

In the play Box-Mao-Box, unlike the other plays because it is a play in which none of the characters interact, the emphasis on correctness continues, nonetheless, as the Long-Winded Lady corrects and refines her own speech. She changes "comprehend" to "believe" or "accept," "recall" to "retain," "plup" to "plut," and "crullers" to "doughnut centers"; as well, she more accurately explains her place in the accident that occured as "doing it" rather than "being in it." In Albee's most recent play, the correction of one character's speech by another character in the play constitutes the first exchange of the play and involves the accuracy of the use of the term "to be dead":

THE WIFE: Is he dead?
. . . . .
THE MISTRESS: I wish you wouldn't say that: is he dead?
THE WIFE: I'm sorry.
THE MISTRESS: It's not your curiosity I mind [. . .] . It's the form. [. . .]
THE WIFE: No matter, let me rephrase it, then. Has he . . . died? (AO, pp.3-4)

All this concern by characters in many of the plays for appropriateness and correctness in language emphasizes the importance they place on words, which they hope will create the identity and supply the meaning which are missing from their lives. Instead, however, the misdirected concern and emphasis deflects them from examination of the real causes of the emptiness that characterizes their existences. The Lawyer's recollection in Tiny Alice clearly points out this ulterior use of words by the characters:

I recall. Suddenly I recall it. When we were children. [. . .] and we would explore . . . those most private parts, of one another, [. . .] we would talk of other things.

> [. . .] How, as our shaking hands passed under skirts or undid buttons, sliding, how we would, both of us, talk of other things . . . Oh, the subterfuges. (TA, p.152)

While the characters' words expose the meaninglessness of their lives to the audience member, the words also appear to hide that meaninglessness from the characters' awareness and act as a substitute for meaning. However, the characters remain unhappy and dissatisfied, so one can see that mindless verbiage, regardless of the correctness of its form, is an insufficient substitute for meaning or hiding place from meaninglessness.

Since existing words appear to have lost their power, characters invent words or terms that may carry some fresh impact, and these inventions draw further attention to the language of the characters. For example, Grandma invents the term "bumble of joy" by slightly distorting the usual term; the distortion of the term emphasizes the distortion of parental love shown by Mommy and Daddy towards their "bumble." The Butler in Tiny Alice creates the word "screep" (TA, p.34) to refer to the sound made by birds, and the Wife in All Over uses "floration" and then wonders if such a word exists. (AO, p.97)

In other instances, in order to attempt to establish a clear meaning for words so that the chances of being understood are possibly increased, characters go so far as to define words which are used in speaking. For example, when the Lawyer asks the Butler to accompany him to his interview with the Cardinal, in order "to back me up, when I want emphasis," the Butler asks for a clarification of the word "want," emphasizing the importance of that recurrent word in Albee's plays: "In the sense that my father used the word? Wants emphasis; lacks emphasis?" (TA, p.99) In A Delicate Balance, Agnes defines the

one word that, in a broader sense, defines the entire existences of all the characters: "maintenance." She asserts that maintenance, which is synonymous with the phrase "to keep in shape," does not denote change or alteration. Instead, "When we keep something in shape, we maintain its shape--whether we are proud of that shape or not is another matter--we keep it from falling apart. We do not attempt the impossible. We maintain. We hold." (DB, p.88) And Agnes does work to maintain the facade of stability, friendship, family love, and meaning that her family has established, combining the proper proportions of truth and deception that are necessary to sustain the delicate balance. Similarly, the "motto" that Tobias straightforwardly puts forward, "We do what we can" (DB, p.19), is precisely relevant to their monotonous, self-deceptive, empty lives. All that the characters seem to believe that they can do is simply maintain this state, without attempting to make positive changes. The motto of the next family that is presented by Albee, the family in All Over, is a grim rejoiner to "We do what we can." As the Best Friend explains, the family motto in All Over is "You end up with what you start out with" (AO, p.25), which has meaning in the play on many levels, since the characters are seen to "end up" with the same lovelessness, emptiness, and dishonesty that they start out with in the play. Because of fear, passivity, and self-deception, they will only maintain and will not even attempt alteration. Their acceptance of stasis, and their elevation of stasis into a family policy, clearly show that their position is even less hopeful than that of the characters in A Delicate Balance.

The Long-Winded Lady in Box-Mao-Box also emphasizes declining hope as she defines the word "discomfited": "not in the sense of utterly

defeated--though that would be more than enough--but in the sense of confused, or preoccupied." (Box, pp.56-57) She asserts that if one were not too discomfited, he might have been able to hear the sound that she made as she entered the water after falling from the deck of a ship many years ago. The Long-Winded Lady's excessive emphasis on the correctness and the form of her words is at the expense of her emphasis on understanding why she inexplicably fell over the railing of the ocean liner. The word "discomfited," in the sense of utterly defeated, does indeed apply to the Long-Winded Lady, if not to her hypothetical onlookers; and her indirection and deflection ironically serve to draw the attention of the audience member to that aspect of the falling incident which she neglects to discuss.

In contrast to these definitions, George's definition of "ABMAPHID" is a self-conscious mockery of his own state and that of Nick, as well: "Abmaphid has been variously described as a wasting disease of the frontal lobes, and as a wonder drug. It is actually both." (VW, p.37) In the same way, his declension, "Good; better; best; bested" (VW, p.32), is an ironic comment on the failure of his own life and the failure that he foresees for Nick, who lives an even more dishonest life than George does.

A further kind of self-conscious play with language by the characters, which has the paradoxical effect of emphasizing the characters' words and the implications of those words while it attempts deflection, is their fascination with puns and with words that can be interpreted in multiple ways. The Bye-Bye Adoption Agency, which Mrs. Barker represents in The American Dream, is an obvious pun on the modern North American compulsion to buy and buy in an attempt to gain satisfaction

through the acquisition of material goods. Mrs. Barker's name implies her role as a glib hawker of wares in this kind of consumer society in which everything has its price and in which people are viewed as objects and possessions and, as such, are expected to meet certain arbitrary, artificial standards. Grandma's play on two of the meanings of the word "allowance" further emphasizes these points: "You don't make allowances for people. I want an allowance." (AD, p.70) Similarly, when Daddy asks, "I wonder if it might help us any if I said I feel misgivings, that I have definite qualms" (AD, p.82), one at first assumes that Daddy is becoming sensitive to the situation in which apprehension is a justifiable response; however, he quickly follows with the following explanation of the origin of his qualms. They mostly are located "right around where the stitches were." (AD, p.82) Grandma's call for allowances to be made for individual human beings and Daddy's statement about the qualms that he feels in the face of his environment aid the audience member in understanding the attitudes and personalities of these characters.

In the same ways, the Nurse's bawdy punning in The Death of Bessie Smith reflects her personality, her concerns, and the sickness and corruption of the society of which she and the Mayor are representatives:

> The Mayor and his hemorrhoids . . . the mayor's late hemorrhoids . . . are a matter of deep concern to this institution, for the mayor built this hospital; the mayor is here with his ass in a sling, and the seat of government is now in Room 206 [. . .] . (BS, p.40)

The sexual puns and innuendoes in the play, comparable in vividness and explicitness to those in a Restoration play, clearly indicate that sex is neither sacred nor romantic. The Nurse initiates and perpetuates the conversation in which the Intern states that the sheets of his bed

are like a tent, "poled center-upward in my love for you" (BS, p.53), and she apparently sets up one of the Intern's speeches by mimicking his words about the sunset and referring to him as a "monstrous burning intern hanging on the edge of my circumference":

> INTERN: Here am I . . . here am I tangential, while all the while I would serve more nobly as a radiant, not outward from, but reversed, plunging straight to your lovely vortex. (BS, p.51)

However, in her state of self-maintained isolation, the Nurse insists on continuing the sexual relationship mainly on a verbal level in order to perpetuate her control over the Intern.

Martha, in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, demonstrates comparable skill in explicit sexual puns as she tells Nick that he, as a biologist, is "right at the meat of things" (VW, p.63) and as she asks him, "You don't need any props, do you, baby?" (VW, p.61) Honey unwittingly sets up a pun for George when she observes that Martha and Nick dance "like they've danced before":

> GEORGE: It's a familiar dance . . . they both know it. [. . .] It's a very old ritual [. . .] old as they come. (VW, p.131)

However, Martha is disappointed in Nick because, like all the other ambitious men who have chased her, he can "get [his] courage up, but that's all, baby!" (VW, p.189) Although she usually uses much more direct ways of attacking George, in one instance she uses a pun on the word "groom" to attack him, just as she repeatedly uses puns to attack Nick for the difference between his "dandy potential" and the fact that, nonetheless, he is "certainly a flop in some departments." (VW, p.188) George also has disappointed her. She explains, "So, anyway, I married the S.O.B., and I had it all planned out. . . .

He was the groom . . . he was going to be groomed" (VW, p.83) by her father so that he could eventually take over the college; but George refused to fit into her schema, and part of her hostility towards him is a result of his inability or disinclination to accept his compulsory "grooming" along with his chosen role as Martha's groom. Nick's heavy-handed punning is indicative of his role in the interactions among the characters. He is aware that verbal games are being played and that words are the weapons, but he lacks the real skill of accomplished players such as George and Martha. Nonetheless, George reacts with pleased surprise to Nick's clumsy show of skill:

> GEORGE: . . . We should live on Crete, or something.
> NICK: (Sarcastically . . . as if killing a joke) And that, of course, would make us cretins. (VW, p.106)

George's imaginative punning on Martha's abusive, coarse words is typical of their verbal interactions:

> MARTHA: I can see what you're up to, you lousy little . . .
> GEORGE: I'm up to page a hundred and. . . .
> MARTHA: Cut it! Just cut it out! (VW, p.171)

As the night wears on in the play, Martha increases in brutality and vulgarity while George becomes progressively more internalized and creative in his attacks. She becomes a "Gatling gun," inflicting aimless, pointless butchery, while George becomes more precise and deadly. The character the Lawyer, in Tiny Alice, combines George's cold, direct intellectualism and Martha's obsession with sexual innuendo and her brutal diffusion in the puns that he creates. He characterizes Julian as a "bird of prey": "Pray. P-R-A-Y. What a pun I could make on that; bird of pray." (TA, p.45) However, he does not develop the pun; he only intimates that it could be developed, which corresponds to the total lack of completeness and resolution in

any aspect of the play. Similarly, he merely comments to the Cardinal on the fact that Brother Julian is a "lay" brother, and he finds it "very funny," but says nothing, when Julian, a celibate, returns from the chapel and asserts that "the organ is . . . in need of use." (TA, p.81) He uses puns to disguise his threat to Miss Alice as he jealously warns her to avoid "burning down" or being "consumed" (TA, p.89) in her relationship with Julian. In only one instance does Julian succeed in verbally outmaneuvering the Lawyer, in beating the Lawyer at his own game. Julian apparently unwittingly makes a very apt observation about the Lawyer's role as a procurer of clients for Miss Alice as the two men toy with the multiple meanings of the word "solicitor":

> LAWYER: And so you object, as well? To my mention of the Church as solicitor.
> JULIAN: In England I believe you would be referred to as solicitor. (TA, p.82)

Julian is apparently comparably unaware of the ironic implications of his repeated use of the word "asylum" and of his desire, at the end of the play, to return to his asylum. The first definition of the word "asylum" is of a place of safety and refuge from attack or seizure by outside forces; only secondly does the word refer to an institution for the care of mentally ill people. Julian's lack of self-awareness about his motivations for seeking the asylum is comparable to that of the Long-Winded Lady in Box-Mao-Box, who straightforwardly says that her fall into the water "was more of a seaing than a landing, you might say . . . if you like a pun" (Box, p.60), but who cannot or will not "see" anything about herself, her relationships to other people, and her futile life. She does not see that her fall into the sea must

surely have been an unconscious suicide attempt, as a response to the emptiness of her life. She will not see and thus learn that changes must be made so that her life will become bearable to her. Her life mirrors the decline from "art," which involves the ability to create with form and beauty, to "craft," which refers to a lesser skill involving little or no creative thought and innovative change. And she also excels in craft in another sense of that word, that is, in deceiving herself. She demonstrates skillfulness in hanging words together and narrating a poignant and engrossing, if quite fragmented, story; but she seems incapable of the spontaneous, imaginative flashes of insight that would show her the way out of the impasse of her life, giving her existence meaning, form, and beauty.

The Long-Winded Lady is only one of Albee's characters whose language reflects the staleness, weariness, and stasis of their lives. The use of predictable, cliché-ridden speech by characters such as Peter, Mommy, Daddy, Mrs. Barker, Honey, and the three characters in the play Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung parallels the narrowness, conformity, and self-deception that characterize all other aspects of their lives. This is well illustrated by Peter's responses to Jerry, in The Zoo Story, which are conventional, usually polite, and generally bromidic; he speaks moderately, hesitantly, and with inhibitions, like he thinks and lives. He can respond easily and quickly to Jerry only by relying on his knowlege of the proper stereotyped responses. When Jerry states that he wants Peter's bench, Peter instantly proffers the proper, socially sanctioned rebuttal: "People can't have everything they want." (ZS, p.42)

Earlier reactions by Peter to Jerry's questions and statements had foreshadowed this reply. For example, when discussing two of his favorite authors, he never moves beyond inane, predictable comments, even after he "warm[s] up" to the topic: "Baudelaire, of course . . . uh . . . is by far the finer of the two, but Marquand has a place . . . in our . . . uh . . . national . . ." (ZS, p.21). Jerry's response to this textbook beginning to a discussion which should involve enthusiasm and highly individual responses is terse: "Skip it." Later, when Jerry asks Peter about his experience with pornographic playing cards, Peter quickly gives the predictable response: "Oh, now; look here. I didn't need anything like that when I got older." (ZS, p.26) But some of Peter's most self-revealing words follow Jerry's narration of the events in his devastating past and present. Peter briskly begins a reply that demonstrates his total reliance on society's codes and values: "Well, it seems perfectly simple to me. . . ." But his recitation of another cliché is interrupted by Jerry: "Look! Are you going to tell me to get married and have parakeets?" (ZS, p.25) Throughout the play, Jerry consistently interchanges Peter's wife, children, and birds and cats when he speaks of them, because he sees them only in relation to their parallel function as perpetuators of Peter's unexamined life.

Even when pushed to his limits by Jerry's progressively more forceful demands for possession of the bench, Peter cannot break out of the words and concepts that bind and limit his existence. Peter, Everyman, persists in clinging to his right to the bench. Relying solely on phrases and ideas that come into his mind and to his lips ready-made, he appeals to custom ("[. . .] I see no reason why I should

give up this bench. I sit on this bench almost every Sunday afternoon, in good weather." p.41); he appeals to society's tacit restrictions ("People can't have everything they want. You should know that; it's a rule; people can have some of the things they want, but they can't have everything." p.42); and he appeals to the law ("Get away from here. If you don't move on [. . .] I'll get a policeman here and make you go. I warn you, I'll call a policeman." p.43). He finally tries to dismiss Jerry by doing the old "pigeonhole bit," by trying to apply an easy, classifying label and calling Jerry "mad." But, at this point, ad hominem will not work because, as Daniel R. Brown asserts in the Satire Newsletter, "calling Jerry a schizophrenic with a suicidal complex does not eradicate his social criticism,"[6] and it is his valid criticism of Peter's conformity that persists in disconcerting Peter. None of Peter's responses, appeals, threats, or labels can deter Jerry. He persistently refuses to do the one thing that would affect Jerry; that is, he refuses to react to him and talk to him on an honest, sympathetic, intimate level. Thus, the verbal exchanges between Jerry and Peter, with urgency and vehemency on one side and intractability on the other, simultaneously depict and state the problem of human separateness which Jerry wants to overcome. Operating on entirely different verbal levels, the two men use language that exemplifies the great differences between their assumptions, attitudes, and levels of awareness.

Mommy and Daddy, in The Sandbox, and Mrs. Barker, who joins them in The American Dream, share Peter's level of non-awareness, and, hence, they operate on a comparable verbal level. In the earlier play, Mommy's and Daddy's speech obviously consists of "lines," and their self-conscious

method of delivery focuses the audience member's attention on the lines and the emptiness of genuine feeling and emotion of the statements that comprise the lines. For example, after Mommy correctly interprets the meaning of the three off-stage rumbles--that "the time has come for poor Grandma"--she mouths the words that are proper and expected: "I can't bear it!" Daddy's response, made "vacantly" and perfunctorily, is equally as predictable: "I . . . I suppose you've got to be brave." (SB, p.17) In the same way, rather than an honest admission that words are inadequate in the face of death, Grandma's death elicits a string of standard clichés of mourning from Mommy and Daddy:

> Our long night is over. We must put away our tears, take off our mourning . . . and face the future. It's our duty. [. . .] It's hard to be sad . . . she looks . . . so happy. It pays to do things well. (SB, pp.18-19)

These phrases, mimicked by Grandma with bitter mockery, are recited in ways that are equally as insincere. During Grandma's death scene, Mommy is described as "Beginning to weep," as "Whispering through her tears," and as being "Barely able to talk" (SB, p.17) because of her ostensible emotional state. In truth, neither Mommy nor Daddy feels any grief at Grandma's death, but they know that they should. Therefore, they rely on the words and gestures that other people have used in real expressions of personal grief, hoping that they have satisfied society's requirement by exactly following the proper form, even if there is no feeling to give substance to the form.

In The American Dream, Albee continues his examination of the lives of characters who are all form and no substance. He reduces the plot of the play to a series of unanticipated arrivals and abrupt departures and the characters to absurdly exaggerated sterotypes as he skillfully employs many of the verbal techniques perfected by Ionesco

in The Bald Soprano. The dialogue of the characters clearly catches the trivial, frequently pointless, subject matter; the absorption in petty detail and meaningless distinctions; the nagging, whining, and petulance of tone; the combination of aggression and complaisance; and the sociological jargon and automatic cliché that characterize the speech of modern man. The language of the characters in The American Dream has a basis in reality, so it cannot be summarily dismissed, but it is "typical" speech that is carried to the limits of exaggeration and parody. Thus, the talk is disconcerting because the clichés that recur so often are slightly distorted. The characters' responses are impeccably proper in form but improper in content. Neither the platitudes nor the insults elicit exactly the usual reactions; and words do not necessarily match apparent reality.

Mommy and Daddy's verbal interaction concerning the hat that Mommy bought vividly illustrates Albee's technique. Daddy, who is "all ears" at the mention of Mommy's story, tonelessly repeats the last words of her narrative "to show he is paying attention." (AD, p.59) This kind of response is typical not only of Daddy but also of Peter in The Zoo Story, who repeats words from Jerry's description of his landlady--"disgusting" and "unthinkable"--as his response to Jerry's words, and also of Honey in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, who frequently uses words from the speech of other characters in formulating her responses. This trait shared by Peter, Honey, and Daddy suggests that these characters have become almost incapable of original thought and honest, personal responses.

In Daddy's case, it also suggests his subjugation to Mommy, who in primer prose tells of her delight at finding a hat that she liked:

> "Oh, this is a lovely little hat; I'll take this hat; oh, my, it's lovely. What color is it?" And they said, "Why, this is beige; isn't it a lovely little beige hat?" And I said, "Oh, it's just lovely." And so, I bought it. (AD, p.59)

However, upon encountering the chairman of her woman's club--"She's just a dreadful woman, but she is chairman of our woman's club, so naturally I'm terribly fond of her." (p.60)--Mommy learned that the hat was wheat-colored, not beige. She returned the hat, "made a terrible scene," and received an exchange:

> DADDY: (Clearing his throat) I would imagine that it was the same hat they tried to sell you before.
> MOMMY: (With a little laugh) Well, of course it was!
> DADDY: That's the way things are today; you just can't get satisfaction; you just try.
> MOMMY: Well, I got satisfaction. (AD, p.61)

This pointless story sets the tone for the improbable, zany, almost comic-strip quality of the dialogue that is to follow as it simultaneously anticipates the main action of the play, in which satisfaction from human beings is demanded in exactly the same way that satisfaction is demanded from a purchase that one makes at the store.

When Mrs. Barker arrives, the long-awaited "they" who is the sales representative from Bye-Bye Adoption Agency, the emphasis on language, through incongruity and distortion, continues. For example, when Daddy hesitates to let Mrs. Barker in the door, the following exchange takes place:

> DADDY: I'd like to talk about it some more.
> MOMMY: THERE'S NO NEED. You made up your mind; you were firm; you were masculine and decisive.
> DADDY: We might consider the pros and the . . .
> MOMMY: I won't argue with you; it has to be done; you were right. Open the door. (AD, p.73)

Guest and host automatically exchange the requisite amenities; but although the structure is impeccable, the content is distorted, calling attention to these social exchanges that have lost all meaning:

MRS. BARKER: My, what an unattractive apartment you have!
MOMMY: Yes, but you don't know what a trouble it is. Let me tell you . . . . (AD, p.77)

Similarly, Mommy rolls all the proper social questions into two long distorted ones: "Would you like a cigarette, and a drink, and would you like to cross your legs? [. . .] Are you sure you're comfortable? Won't you take off your dress?" (AD, pp. 77,79)

Mrs. Barker's most frequent response is "I don't mind if I do," which she uses in both appropriate and inappropriate places. Similarly, she uses other phrases that frequently are repeated in conversations; but in this instance her use of automatic, thoughtless, hyperbolic phrases (how fascinating, how enthralling, how spellbinding, how gripping, how disgusting, how engrossing) results in completely inappropriate responses to Grandma's story of the mutilation of Mommy and Daddy's original bumble of joy. Throughout Grandma's narrative, clichés are given literal, physical enactment in order to demonstrate the real cruelty and insensitivity that underlies the language that is habitually used by people. As the characters in The American Dream demonstrate, the mindless acceptance of habitual words and phrases determines, to a great extent, individuals' expectations for other people and for situations and delimits their conceptions of possible responses and behavior.

In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Honey's responses to people, situations, and stories combine the essential staidness, restraint, and naivety of Peter with the giddiness, zaniness, and unpredictability of the characters in The American Dream. She is at least as limited in imagination and rigidly trapped in rules and conventions as Peter is,

but her drunkenness slightly loosens her control, so she makes conventional comments and "polite" conversation that are always slightly awry, always slightly inappropriate:

> GEORGE: (To HONEY and NICK) Martha is the only true pagan on the eastern seaboard.
> HONEY: Oh, that's nice. Isn't that nice, dear? (VW, p.73)

In Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, Mao, the Long-Winded Lady, and the Old Woman differ greatly from each other in many ways, but the language of each of the three is similar in effect to that of Honey, Peter, Mommy and Daddy, and the other characters who rely on preconceived ideas and preformulated phrases to help them maintain their states of isolation, emotional withdrawal, and uninvolvement. Mao speaks pedagogically, straightforwardly reciting his facts and information in a non-histrionic, reasonable, yet forceful manner. However, one quickly observes that Mao's words are not spontaneous and that his ideas are not open to question. He is totally committed to a particular social, political, and economic theory, and what he speaks is the dogma of the Chinese Communist Party, much of which is taken from the Red Book of quotations from Mao. He presents a propaganda line that is filled with the jargon of the group:

> Communism is at once a complete system of proletarian ideology and a new social system. It is [. . .] the most complete, progressive, revolutionary, and rational system in human history. The communist ideological and social system alone is full of youth and vitality, sweeping the world with the momentum of an avalanche and the force of a thunderbolt. (Box, p.44)

In the description of Mao that precedes the play, he is said to be aware of the other characters and the audience, but he is not to react to either. He is intent only on dissemination of Marxist-Leninist

theory and tactics, an inflexible, unvarying, closed system, to the people around him:

> Whoever sides with the revolutionary people is a revolutionary. Whoever sides with imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat-capitalism is a counter-revolutionary. [. . .] People of the world, unite and defeat the U.S. aggressors and all their running dogs. (Box, pp. 80,118)

Mao is intent on dividing the people of the world into two groups, his friends and the enemy, but he is not interested in genuine, personal interaction with the individual people who comprise the two arbitrary groups.

The Old Woman's speech, a closed system comparable to that of Mao, consists of the sing-song recitation of an old, maudlin poem. She also is not engaged in interaction with the two other characters, although she does occasionally react to them by gestures. She speaks only to the theatre audience. The Old Woman eats her apple and her can of potted meat between stanzas and remains relatively uninvolved even in the emotion underlying the verses of the poem that she repetitiously recites: "Over the Hill the the Poor-House." If the poem about the plight of a lonely, rejected old woman is, in fact, a recounting of the events in her life, one sees that she has been reduced to reacting to one of the most cruel and devastating situations with somebody else's words and somebody else's conception of the proper emotional reaction in that situation. Her acceptance of empty, sentimental clichés that serve to predetermine her behavior and completely limit her range of possible responses to the situation is visually paralleled in her quite restricted movement on the stage.

The Long-Winded Lady, a twentieth century version of the abandoned Old Woman, recounts her experiences in a slow, circuitous, introspective

manner and is totally unaware of the presence of the other characters or of the audience. She talks to (or, more precisely, "at") a dozing Minister who sits near her, using the Minister as "a sounding board" (Box, p.34) for her verbalized free associations. She narrates self-revealing stories about herself and her interactions with other people in language that sounds dispassionate and well-rehearsed. She persistently returns to the story of her fall from the ocean liner, but she worries only about determining the exact sound that her body made as it hit the water. She returns to discussions of her daughter, but she only tells stories of her daughter's sexual indiscretions and recounts her daughter's exact words. She returns to narratives of her husband's dying and death, but she rarely goes beyond the simple recounting of events and of other people's words in order to express her own feelings and reactions.

Although the Long-Winded Lady's vocabulary, concerns, ideas, speech patterns, images, and idiom differ greatly from those of Mao and the Old Woman, one sees the basic similarity that underlies the speech of the three characters. The three dissimilar characters represent three levels of banality: "the despair of the middle class, the heartbreak of the dispossessed, and the rote of the professional insurgent."[7] Like Peter or Honey, they skillfully use particular rhetorical devices--inane responses, clichés, dogma, quotes, recitation of stories and poems--that keep them psychologically, and sometimes even physically, distanced and that allow them to avoid facing a painful or disruptive situation in an honest, personal way. As long as they can rely on ready-made language and do not have to think about their words, they can avoid thinking about the situation to which the words refer.

The language of these characters can be contrasted to that of the other characters in the plays who are more nearly "on" to themselves, who share at least the minimal, bitter self-awareness of the Daughter in All Over:

> I feel like a child, rebellious, misunderstood and known oh, so very well; sated and . . . empty. I'm on to myself; there's no mistake there. I'm all the things you think of me, every one of you, and I'm also many more. (AO, p.58)

Jerry in The Zoo Story, who is on to the emptiness and misunderstanding that make up his life, is unable to use the language of the Peters of the world. He may be almost blind to some of his own deceptions or to the insensitivity of some of his responses, but his minimal awareness and admission of the "sated and empty" quality of his life disallows his acceptance and use of Peter's kind of language.

Instead, Jerry's vocabulary and syntax reflect his desires and attitudes. His words are unpredictable and frequently disconcerting, like the events in his life have been. When he tells stories, they are vivid and emotionally engaging, and his responses are blunt but honest. He sees no need any longer to hide any part of human life from himself or others, so he finds no words or ideas unacceptable, and he uses no euphemisms. He openly speaks of living next to a "colored queen" who frequents the "john," of owning a pack of pornographic playing cards, and of his sexual encounters. Jerry describes how, for eleven days, he was "queer, queer, queer . . . with bells ringing and banners snapping in the wind" (ZS, p.25); and he announces his present inability or disinclination "to have sex with, or, how is it put? [by people such as Peter] . . . make love to anybody more than once. Once; that's it." (ZS, p.25) Peter reacts to all this information in his predictable manner:

PETER: (Embarrassed) I'd rather not talk about these things. (ZS, p.26)

The only instance in which Jerry uses a clichéd expression is equally as disconcerting to Peter as are his usual imagery and figures of speech, because he uses it in what would appear to be a totally inappropriate place. As he quizzes Peter, he learns that Peter has two daughters, no sons:

JERRY: But you wanted boys.
PETER: Well . . . naturally, every man wants a son, but . . .
JERRY: (Lightly mocking) But that's the way the cookie crumbles? (ZS, p.16)

Even by the time of this interaction, which comes quite early in the play, Jerry has become aware of Peter's typical way of responding, and he mocks this kind of reliance on clichés. And even though the cliché annoys Peter at first, he quickly accepts it as the proper way of evaluating the situation:

JERRY: That is the way the cookie crumbles.
PETER: Yes . . . I guess so. (ZS, pp.16-17)

Although The Sandbox and The American Dream have moved far beyond realism and differ in tone from The Zoo Story, Grandma's use of language in both these plays is quite similar in many ways to that of Jerry. Reacting to an environment in which proper, conformist, cliché-filled speech is the norm, Grandma uses that kind of language in inappropriate situations so that the absurdity and meaninglessness of the content is pointed up. For example, as she concludes her account to Mrs. Barker of the mutilation and destruction of a child by Mommy and Daddy, she asks, "How do you like them apples?" (AD, p.101) She uses clichés in a literal, not a figurative, way, so that the real meaning of the words that comprise the worn-out expression are again brought to the audience member's consciousness; thus, she states that the unsatisfactory original

bumble of joy "cried its heart out," that it "only had eyes for its Daddy," that it "kept its nose up in the air," and failed to provide satisfaction in many other ways:

> . . . they found out all sorts of terrible things about it, like: it didn't have a head on its shoulders, it had no guts, it was spineless, its feet were made of clay . . . just dreadful things. (AD, pp.100-101)

Grandma slightly misquotes or distorts clichés, simultaneously mocking the inanity of the original and creating just enough dissonance with the distortion to focus attention on the content of the newly created phrase. This is most vividly demonstrated in Grandma's expression in which the structure ("deformity" of a standard cliché) parallels and thus reinforces the content: "We live in the age of deformity." (AD, p.86)

Grandma also goes beyond clichés in some instances to make statements that are intense, imaginative, real, and meaningful. The juxtaposition of these comments, especially those about the sadness and loneliness of old age, with the other dialogue of the play, which constitutes a parody of language and communication, magnifies the significance and meaning of these few honest, human attempts at communication. Nonetheless, they remain attempts. Although Grandma recognizes and reacts against the clichés that control the characters' lives and fill their speech, and although her reactions surely suggest the possibility and preferability of other values and other ways of life, she is finally ineffectual in counteracting the "complacency, cruelty, emasculation, and vacuity" (AD, p.54) that surround her.

When other characters who are "on to themselves" to greater or lesser degrees--such as Martha, George, the Butler, the Lawyer, Agnes,

Tobias, Claire, and the characters in the play All Over--use clichéd expressions, their methods and mockery are comparable to those of Grandma. For example, using a cliché that is in direct opposition to the tone, language, and action of the rest of the play Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, George calls for "Everything in proportion." (VW, p.39) However, the next cliché that George uses eventually comes to be seen as a warning to Martha of the events that are to follow in their games: "Everything in its place, Martha . . . everything in its own good time." (VW, p.59) Using further apt distortions of familiar terms and sayings, George claims that the favorite faculty sport at the college in New Carthage is "musical beds" (VW, p.34), and he describes his past life with Martha as "blood under the bridge." (VW, p.141) Martha attacks George's acceptance and reliance on the adage that "the worm turns":

> MARTHA: You moving on the principle the worm turns? Well, the worm part's O.K. . . . cause that fits you fine, but the turning part . . . unh-unh! You're in a straight line, buddy-boy, and it doesn't lead anywhere . . . except maybe the grave. (VW, p.168)

George continues to use clichés, self-consciously and for effect, which seem vivid and accurate. For example, in reacting to Nick's hypocrisy, George bitterly states, "You gotta have a swine to show you where the truffles are" (VW, p.149); and with equal amounts of mockery, bitterness, and sadness, he describes himself and Martha as "vicious children, with their oh-so-sad-games, hopscotching their way through life, etcetra, etcetra." (VW, p.197) Finally, with the ironic use of the expression, "All truth being relative" (VW, p.222), and with his slight distortion of a stereotyped image to describe their son, George indicates that he is living less completely in a world of illusion than Martha is and

that he accepts the fact of the unreality of their "blond-eyed, blue-haired son." (VW, p.72)

In the play Tiny Alice, the Butler completes a cliché used by the Lawyer in his contemptuous description of the Cardinal and acts as if it were a fresh new image. The Lawyer mentions the Cardinal, who is "a most unusual Prince of the Church--a prince of a man, in fact--a prince whose still waters . . . well, you finish it":

> BUTLER: (Pretending puzzlement as to how to finish it) . . . whose still waters [. . .] (Pretending to be talking to himself) . . . run quiet? Run deep? Run deep! That's good! (TA, p.38)

In reference to Julian, both Miss Alice ("He who hesitates loses all," p.67) and the Butler ("Special people, special problems," p. 129) also use clichés mockingly while misleading Julian. But the Lawyer remains the most coldly malevolent and audacious, as is indicated by his flippant distortion of very mundane images in order to discuss the possibility of killing Julian:

> LAWYER: (Calmly) You know we may have to shoot him; you know that may be necessary. [. . .] If the great machinery threatens . . . to come to a halt . . . the great axis on which all turns . . . if it needs oil . . . well, we lubricate it, do we not. And if blood is the only oil handy . . . what is a little blood? [. . .] Well, let's make that saint when we come to him. (TA, p.142)

A similar conscious distortion is created by Agnes in A Delicate Balance, for similarly malicious purposes, in an attack on her sister Claire: "As the saying has it, the one thing sharper than a serpent's tooth is a sister's ingratitude." (DB, p.16) In her reciprocal attack, Claire skillfully distorts the stereotyped form in which formal apologies take place. She begins with words which imply that certain other words and ideas will follow, but one's expectations are not fulfilled, and the

unfulfilled expectations serve to increase one's awareness of the actual words that Claire speaks: "I must apologize, Agnes; I'm . . . very sorry. [. . .] I apologize that my nature is such to bring out in you the full force of your brutality." (DB, p.22) Since Claire is correct in asserting that "like sister, like sister, by God" (DB, p.34), one is not surprised that both sisters attack with equal effectiveness and devastation when they use adages and stereotyped expressions straightforwardly:

> AGNES: [. . .] I do believe there are some with [no martyrdoms] and others who have known Job. The helpless are the cruelest lot of all; they shift their burdens so.
>
> CLAIRE: If you interviewed a camel, he'd admit he loved his load. (DB, p.117)

This skill at verbal abuse that exists among all the members of Tobias's family increases the irony of Claire's assertion that "all happy families are alike" (DB, p.84); there is no happiness shown in any of Albee's families. They are alike in their lovelessness. Similarly, Agnes's ironic assertion that "there is nowhere to rest the weary head . . . or whatever" (DB, p.65) suggests the lament made with equal sadness and self-mockery by the Mistress in the play All Over: "What a sad and shabby time we live in." (DB, p.42) The characters in A Delicate Balance and All Over appear, finally, to arrive in the same situation in which the Long-Winded Lady in Box-Mao-Box finds herself. Her statement at the end of the play is the paradigm of the use and manipulation of clichéd, stereotyped expressions in order to call attention to the almost mindless use of words and phrases in everyday speech and in order to point up the real meaning and seriousness underlying the words. With "a sad little half-laugh," the Long-Winded Lady concludes the play and sums up her life: "Good heavens, [. . .] I have nothing to die for." (Box, p.118)

The characters' use of dialects and foreign languages is equally as revealing as their use of clichés is, both when the clichés are used automatically and unconsciously and when they are used self-consciously and ironically. The use of dialects--an Irish brogue, a southern drawl, a hillbilly twang, "cute" baby-talk, and so on--is limited in Albee's plays to those characters who not only are articulate but who also are more self-aware. They may not know exactly what their problems are, and they may not know how to deal effectively with their situations, but at least characters such as Grandma, George, and Claire are well aware that problems do exist and that it is a "fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen." (AD, p.54) Grandma, for example, realizes the dishonesty underlying Mommy and Daddy's marriage, and she uses baby-talk to enlighten Daddy about Mommy's motive for marrying him:

> When she was no more than eight years old she used to climb up on my lap and say, in a sickening little voice, "When I gwo up, I'm going to mahwy a wich old man; I'm going to set my wittle were end right down in a tub o' butter, that's what I'm going to do." (AD, p.69)

Grandma quotes Mommy's exact words and mimicks her pronunciation so that the words clearly stand out from the background. As well, the humor and the innocence that are generally associated with childish mispronunciations serve to create a strong, ironic contrast with the sophisticated, soulless cunning that underlies the meaning of the words. The same kind of emphasis through juxtaposition results when Martha uses baby-talk to call for her constant flow of liquor: "I'm firsty." (VW, p.16)

> MARTHA: Oh. Well, then, you just trot over to the barie-poo. . . .
> GEORGE: (Taking the tone from her) . . . and make your little mommy a gweat big drink. (VW, p.48)

Similarly, Claire, in A Delicate Balance, states that she used her "little-girl voice" when she drunkenly marched to the front of the

Alcoholics Annonymous meeting and announced, "'My name is Claire, and I am a . . . alcoholic.' . . . and then I curtsied; I made my little-girl curtsy, and on my little-girl feet I padded back to my chair." (DB, p.34)

These same characters also speak in voices that are not their own when they say things that are intensely felt and which would reveal their real feelings to other people if they did not hide behind a "funny" voice. George and Martha, in particular, seem unable to make serious assertions of need or pain in their own voices. They cover their expressions of feeling with a humorous dialect that also may be bitterly ironic. For example, Martha's imitation at the beginning of the play of Bette Davis in "some goddamn Warner Brothers epic" anticipates the verbal subterfuges and games that are to follow:

> MARTHA: (Looks about the room. Imitates Bette Davis) What a dump. Hey, what's that from? "What a dump?" (VW, p.6)

As Martha peripherally explains, the reason for the assertion by the character in the movie is that "she's discontent" (VW, p.6), and this bit of explanation increases in significance throughout the play. George similarly refuses to deal realistically with his discontent and sadness. After telling Nick the story of the boy who accidentally killed both of his parents and who has remained in an asylum during the past thirty years, George makes one short, serious statement: "Some things are sad, though." However, in order to hide his vulnerability, he quickly switches to a humorous dialect that mocks his former seriousness:

> GEORGE: (Imitates a pep-talker) But ya jest gotta buck up an' face 'em, 'at's all. Buck up! (VW, p.97)

As Martha sits alone at the beginning of Act Three of the play, she moves through baby-talk, through role-playing a conversation between herself and George, and through absurd stories, toasts, songs, and noises in a monologue that clearly suggests the loneliness and unhappiness in her life. But she will not speak of this misery to herself or others in her "own" voice. When Nick discovers her jiggling the ice in her glass, giggling, and repeating the sound "Clink! . . . Clink! . . . Clink! . . . Clink!" (VW, p.186), he asserts, "You're all crazy: nuts." (VW, p.188) The sadness of Martha's words in response is emphasized, not hidden, by the heavy Irish brogue that she affects as a diversionary tactic: "Awww, 'tis the refuge we take when the unreality of the world weighs too heavy on our tiny heads." (VW, p.188) George, the most verbally skillful of all Albee's characters, affects a hillbilly accent, imitates the speech of a bashful little boy giving flowers to his girlfriend, and uses German, Spanish, French, and Latin in his attacks and counterattacks on the other characters. George's use of the bashful little boy's speech is particularly ironic, considering the context in which it is used in the play. Using a voice of innocence and humor, he offers to Martha a bouquet of snapdragons which will later come to represent the "snapping" of all the illusions that have held their marriage together and which also will be seen as the flowers that lie on the grave of their past, empty life together.

Claire, in A Delicate Balance, shares George's level of bitter self-awareness and also shares his verbal skill in the use of dialects. At the beginning of the play, she uses a southern accent to make her voice stand out against the polite, inane, conversational voices that

surround her and to draw attention to her question which will serve to force Edna and Harry to explain that which they do not wish to discuss, that is, to explain why they have unexpectedly arrived, late at night, at the home of their friends:

> CLAIRE: The question--'less I'm going deaf from all the alcohol--was (southern accent) "Have you-all been to the club?" (DB, p.49)

When talking about Julia's repeatedly unsuccessful marriages, Claire uses a Texas accent as a diversionary tactic when she makes a pronouncement which she knows will be highly inflammatory, despite its probable truth: "I swar! Ef I din't love muh sister so, Ah'd say she got yuh hitched fur the pleasure uh gettin' yuh back." (DB, p.80) In another instance, she is described as having a "twang in her voice" as she begins an attack on Agnes: "Maw used to say: 'Claire girl,' . . . she had an uncle named Claire, so she always called me Claire-girl [. . .] when you go out into the world, get dumped outa the nest, or pushed by your sister . . . ." (DB, pp. 92-93) However, like George's pep-talking or Martha's brogue, Claire's twang cannot cover the accuracy or intensity of the words being spoken. Although the characters attempt to escape responsibility for their words by affecting another voice and attempt to deflect other characters' awareness of the intensity of their words by affecting a humorous dialect, their subterfuges remain unsuccessful in deflecting the attention of the audience member. Instead, the juxtaposition and the resulting dissonance draw further attention to their words.

The quite specific ways in which the characters call attention to their words--their frequent corrections of each other's terminology;

their unconscious or self-conscious use of clichés, euphemisms, puns, innuendoes, and so on; their use of dialects; and the many other ways in which they play with language--fit into broader patterns of verbal devices used by Albee to emphasize the language of the plays. In all the plays, three major verbal patterns can be seen: first, the use of set speeches, stories, and parables; second, counterpointed dialogue which frequently results in ironic verbal juxtapositions; and, third, an insistent repetition within each play of particular words, phrases, and ideas.

The most basic of the three of course is the characters' stories and speeches, which become, in many instances, almost formal recitations. Characters such as Jerry, George, Martha, Tobias, and the Wife in All Over announce the title of the speech or story that is to follow. These recitations most frequently are made by the more articulate characters who are "on to themselves" and to the complexities of their problematic situations. The recitations always are made using the vocabulary and rhythms of speech that are associated with each individual character. Thus, Jerry's stories about the deaths of his mother, father, and aunt, about his brief homosexual affair and his current sexual dissatisfaction, about the contents of his room and the co-occupants of his roominghouse, and about his encounters with his landlady and her dog are told in the slangy, disjunctive, indirect, flippant, but vivid and intensely personal language that distinguishes Jerry. Peter cannot help perceiving that Jerry is "full of stories" (ZS, p.29). However, he does not or cannot perceive the meaning of Jerry's underlying plan of finding direction in his life and of making contact with another human being through indirection, even in the face of Jerry's introduction to the central story of the play:

> (As if reading from a huge billboard) THE STORY OF JERRY AND THE DOG! What I am going to tell you has something to do with how sometimes it's necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly. (ZS, p.30)

In The Death of Bessie Smith, Jack's monologue to Bessie, which comprises all of Scene Three of the play, reveals his plan to push Bessie back to stardom: "We're drivin' north tonight, an' when you get in New York . . . you show 'em where you been. Honey, you're gonna go back on top again . . . I mean it . . . you are." (BS, p.38) In his excited, concerned, and optimistic voice, he speaks of movement and freedom and success. The juxtaposition of this set speech with the Negro couple's later brutal mistreatment by the two white nurses makes the irony of Jack's words nearly unbearable. The Nurse, the main character in this play, has one major speech that epitomizes her personality, attitudes, and hopelessness. Using ugly images and speaking in a voice that is violent, abusive, and nearly hysterical, she expresses her sickness and disgust with every aspect of her life: "I am sick of everything in this hot, stupid, fly-ridden world. [. . .] I WANT OUT!" (BS, pp.70-71) However, the Nurse's speech seems to have no relationship to her actions. She refuses to risk anything in order to change her world so she is left to stagnate in her discontent. Only the Intern will both admit the horror of their situation--"I am not concerned with politics . . . but I have a sense of urgency . . . a dislike of waste . . . stagnation . . . I am stranded . . . here." (BS, p.59)--and will then act to change it.

Self-perpetuated inaction is the main trait of characters such as Mommy and Mrs. Barker in The American Dream. They possess no self-awareness. Nonetheless, they give recitations about their lives,

telling pointless stories which parallel their pointless lives. Mommy aggressively announces, "I went to buy a new hat yesterday," and begins her story which also begins the repeated instances throughout the play in which the meaning of the word "satisfaction" is perverted. Similarly, Mrs. Barker's pointless stories about her brother, the Village Idiot, are typical of the profusion of pointless exchanges that make up the play. Grandma's story about the mutilation of Mommy and Daddy's first bumble of joy is told in her usual wise-cracking tone, while mindless Mrs. Barker interrupts with inappropriate exclamations. The Young Man echoes the events of Grandma's story in his own story, a melodramatic account of the human consequences of a demand for the stereotyped conception of perfection. Just as scenes of comedy are used for contrast and relief in tragic works, scenes of melodrama create contrast in an absurdly satirical farce. Therefore, in a melodramatic monologue which is punctuated by Grandma's consoling interjections, the young American Dream boy explains: "I have suffered losses . . . that I can't explain. A fall from grace . . . a departure of innocence . . . loss . . . loss." (AD, p.114)

In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Martha narrates her savage, destructive stories in her usual slangy, coarse language and with her usual diffusive "Gatling gun" effect. She wounds and kills verbally in the same "large, random, inaccurate" manner in which the cancer destroys the husband of the Long-Winded Lady in Box-Mao-Box: "Spread enough and you're bound to kill something. Don't aim! Engulf! Imprecision!" (Box, p.68) George accurately describes Martha as "slashing away at everything in sight, scarring up half the world." (VW, p.152) Each of Martha's five major stories and speeches are spread over several pages of the text. All are interrupted by George's

comments, threats, pleas, or acts of violence and by Honey's inappropriate and innocent remarks and Nick's deliberate ones which urge Martha on to the completion of the stories.

In each instance, Martha's stories precipitate disruption and increasing violence. As she ends the first story, concerning the boxing match between herself and George in which she knocked George "flat . . . in a huckleberry bush" (VW, p.56), he aims a short-barreled shotgun at the back of her head and pulls the trigger. Although the gun is only a toy and although a parasol, not a bullet bringing death, emerges from the end of the gun, this incident effectively foreshadows events that will follow. Martha announces, "I'm telling a story" (VW, p.80), as she begins her second disjointed narration, the story of her marriage to George and of his failure to become any more than a "BOG in the History Department." The conclusion of this story coincides both with George's implied physical threat, as he breaks a liquor bottle and stands "holding the remains of the bottle by the neck" (VW, p.84), and with his overt psychological threat, as he loudly sings "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" in an attempt to drown out her words. Martha precedes her story of George's futile attempt to publish a book about his life with the sarcastic statement, "It's really a very sad story" (VW, p.132); the conclusion of this story concurs with George's attempt to strangle her. In her fourth major narrative, Martha reveals the complex nature of her destructiveness, arising out of self-hatred and guilt. In her long narrative comprised of her "Abandoned" speech, her "Earth Mother" speech, and the speeches that end with the lament, "George and Martha; sad, sad, sad" (VW, pp.185-192), Martha alternates among mockery, sadness, and bitterness. For a brief period, she appears

actually to be fulfilling her claim: "I'm on to myself." (VW, p.153) However, her momentary honesty is lost in the final story that she tells: "(By rote; a kind of almost tearful recitation) Our son. You want our son? You'll have it." (VW, p.216) As George simultaneously concludes his recitation of the Requiem Mass, Martha concludes her story with the same primer prose announcement of the title that began the narration: "our SON." (VW, p.227) And destruction once again accompanies the conclusion of a story told by Martha as George reveals that their son is dead, killed in an automobile accident as he swerved to avoid hitting "a porcupine, and drove straight into a [. . .] large tree." (VW, p.231)

George tells his final story, of the arrival of the telegram announcing their son's death, in the same self-ironic, inventive, convoluted manner in which he makes his other main speeches of the play. These other speeches include his attack on the scientific, pragmatic attitude towards life which he finds epitomized in Nick; the defense of his partnership in the creation of his and Martha's son; his narration of the story of the boy who ordered bergin; his lament for the decline of humanitarianism and civilization; and his story which constitutes the game of "Get the Guests." Maintaining a skillful thrust-and-parry as he defends against attacks from both Nick and Martha, George's six main speeches and stories generally alternate with those of Martha. Although her stories are much longer and usually initiate the verbal contests, George's shorter, more precise words usually succeed in winning the contests.

The stories and speeches by Martha and George both state and demonstrate destructiveness. Similarly, all Julian's five major speeches

and stories in Tiny Alice--the story of his six years in a mental asylum, the story of his hallucination about making love with the woman in the asylum who thought herself to be the Virgin Mary, the recollections from his childhood of horseback riding and of the Welsh groom, the story of his dreams of service and of violent martyrdom, and his final, long death speech--demonstrate the complex mixture of religion and sex, of service and masochism, and of faith and insanity that comprise Julian's conception of God and set the tone for the literal and metaphysical mystery of the play.

Similarly, Agnes's two speeches about the likelihood of her madness balance the play, A Delicate Balance, by their positions at the beginning and the end of the work. The locations of the speeches imply that the strange, disturbing, and painful experiences occasioned by the nightmarish visitation by Harry and Edna and their terror are merely brief interruptions in Agnes's and her family's unfluctuating, well-maintained existences. After Harry and Edna's departure, Agnes will pick up her life, as she picks up her speech, and will continue as if nothing had happened. Agnes tells no stories in this play. Instead, she makes assertive speeches in formal, controlled language. All these speeches refer to her position in the family as the one who sees the situation and the possible alternatives but who does not make decisions, who only lives by the rules and sees that the decisions made by other people are made to work and that the balance is maintained. Her speeches contrast directly with the slangy, flip, idiomatic manner--similar to that of Jerry and Grandma--in which Claire tells her stories of futile searches: first, for love in her adultery with Tobias and Harry; second, for strength in her trips to Alcoholics Annonymous; and finally, for escape,

symbolized by her search for a topless bathing suit to wear on "an island off Paraguay [. . .] where it is always good and happy." (DB, p.78)

Tobias, the least articulate and the least willing of the three main characters in A Delicate Balance to seek self-awareness, tells the fewest stories. His careful, hesitant speech resembles that of Peter in The Zoo Story and the Orderly in The Death of Bessie Smith, two other characters whose incomplete, elliptical sentences reflect the incompleteness of their lives. His narration of the story of "The cat I had," which takes place at the beginning of the play, becomes progressively more significant in the play as one comes to see that Tobias learned nothing from his interaction with the cat and that he repeats the same mistakes in his relationship with his friend, Harry. Tobias's "aria" at the end of the play cannot compensate for forty years of empty friendship. Harry and Edna learn, too late, that they "shouldn't have come" (DB, p.169) to test the delicately maintained boundaries of friendship.

In the play Box-Mao-Box, all four characters speak "solipsistic monologues"[8]; each monologue constitutes one long, frequently interrupted speech, recitation, or story. The play begins with the word "Box," a "matter-of-fact" (Box, p.18) announcement of the subject of the speech to follow. The Old Woman announces the title of the poem that she will recite throughout the play, "'Over the Hill to the Poor-House'--a poem by Will Carleton" (Box, p.42). The Long-Winded Lady immediately begins her participation in the play by telling her stories of destruction, and the potential destruction, of life, love, and meaning. Mao begins

his propaganda speech with "an ancient Chinese fable called 'The foolish old man who removed the mountains.'" (Box, p.39) The voice from the box speaks in its "schoolmarmish" way, and the Old Woman "uses limping, heavily accented, rhymed hexameters to complain about the events that sent her 'over the hill to the poor-house.'"[9] The Long-Winded Lady consistently speaks in convoluted, complicated sentence patterns; thus, the indirection of her speech mirrors the indirection of her life as she refuses to admit and attempt to cope with any of the painful or problematic situations in her life in a direct, honest way. Mao uses simple, assertive sentences and a tone that is always reasonable--even though his vocabulary increases in words calling for violence--throughout his persuasive, dogmatic speech.

In the play All Over, all the characters are on to the emptiness of their lives, and the play consists of verbalized random thoughts, confessionals, arguments, speeches, and stories that attempt to fill the void created in their lives by the loss of the Husband. The Wife tells the story of seeing the Husband in the hospital where he lay hooked up like "one more machine" (AO, p.18), but she fails to see that she is equally as "hooked" to outside forces in her attempt to find meaning in her life. She tells the stories of her husband's question--"Did I make these children? Was it our doing; the two of us alone?" (AO, p.19)--and of her aunt who "died in the heart" (AO, p.51) at the age of twenty-six, but she fails to realize the relevance of the stories. She has, indeed, helped to make her children into the loveless, ineffectual people which she despises them for being, and she has become very much like her loveless aunt.

The Lawyer tells of seeing his quite mad wife, but his story ends with his admission that what he retains in his memory most vividly from that meeting "is the sound of her sister's bracelet clanking against the steering wheel [. . .] that; clanking as she shifted." (AO, p.35) The Nurse relates the story of the suicide of Dr. Dey, who happened to "go down" simultaneously with the Titanic, so "it became a euphemism and was eventually accepted." (AO, p.28) The old Doctor's stories, of his work with men in the death cells of prisons and of his young, blond grandson and nephew, continue the emphasis on death, illustrating "how we become enraptured by it . . . by the source of our closing down." (AO, p.31) The Daughter makes two set speeches, asserting that "non grata has its compensations" (AO, p.58) and defending her brother against the Wife's cruel attacks:

> Why couldn't you have just left him alone? He's spent his grown life getting set against everything, fobbing it all off, covering his shit as best he can, and so what if the sight of one unexpected, ludicrous thing collapses it all? [. . .] Isn't it proof he's not as . . . little as you said he was? (AO, p.83)

The Mistress, who seems most capable of loving and being loved, tells illustrative stories of her mother's love for her father, of her own first love affair, and of two children battling for their mother's fortune, but she also tells pointless, diversionary stories such as the one about her grandfather with "the eyesight of a turkey buzzard." (AO, p.47) All these overlapping, autobiographical, psychodramatic set pieces comprise the actionless play. In All Over, all the characters seem to speak with the same weary, persistent voice, creating what Michael Murry has accurately called a "ponderous pattern of hesitation and backtracking" in which "[Albee] has each character ruminate on past

incidents, each telling a long story or two like pilgrims en route to some grim Canterbury."[10]

The persistent backtracking in the set pieces in All Over, as in all of Albee's other plays, is only one of the ways in which Albee creates counterpointed dialogue, the second major verbal pattern which is characteristic of his plays. As well, there are deliberate and innocent interruptions of the speech of a character by his listeners; there are stichomythic arguments and narratives; there is participation by characters in several conversations at one time; and there are overlapping and simultaneous speeches. All of these techniques create an ironic juxtaposition and interplay of the characters' words. Characters such as Grandma, George, the Lawyer, and Claire often are quite conscious of the verbal effect created by their asides. The verbal effect created by other characters frequently is accidental but effective. For example, the interplay among the speech of the two nurses and Jack in the play The Death of Bessie Smith provides one of the best examples of the irony that can be created through effective juxtaposition. In Scene Five, in the middle of the bored, pointless telephone conversation between the two white nurses, one hears the sounds of Jack's voice. Then there is a crash, silence, and Jack's desperate cries: "Honey . . . baby . . . we have crashed . . . you all right? . . . Bessie! Bessie!" (BS, p.49) Similarly, in the final scene of the play, while Jack is suffering through a painful retelling of the events of the accident and of the other nurse's refusal to help at Mercy Hospital, the Nurse concerns herself with social and legal technicalities and berates Jack for "mak[ing] trouble for other people." (BS, p.75)

In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, the thrust-and-parry structure of the exchanges between Martha and George creates strong love/hate, attack/defense, witty/malicious counterpoint, and the comments arising out of Nick's single-mindedness and Honey's empty-headedness increase the counterpoint effect. The strongest verbal counterpoint occurs at the end of the first and the third acts of the play. At the end of Act One, George loudly and desperately sings the perverted nursery rhyme "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" while Martha makes a brutal attack on him by telling a story that constitutes a betrayal of their marriage. Martha appears to be winning in their games, as she engages in a devastating round of "Humiliate the Host," but when the game changes to "Bringing up Baby," positions of power also change. Their second simultaneous speeches conclude this new game and the play. George's recitation of the Requiem Mass ends as Martha's story to Nick and Honey about their son ends. Sonny-Jim "dies" as Martha tells her story, because to talk about him to people other than George moves him out of their purely imaginary world and into contact with reality, where he cannot exist.

In Tiny Alice there are no simultaneous speeches, but another kind of verbal interplay is used effectively. Julian's speeches throughout the play consistently are interrupted by ironic comments from all the other characters, emphasizing his position as the only character in the play who does not understand the mystery of Tiny Alice. As Julian explains that he committed himself to an asylum because he "could not reconcile [him]self to the chasm between the nature of God and the use to which men put . . . God. . . . It is God the mover, not God the puppet; God the creator, not the God created by man" (TA, p.43), the Butler

interrupts him with the mocking question, "Six years in the loony bin for semantics?" Julian's narratives to Miss Alice concerning his hallucinations and his dreams of martyrdom are interrupted by her allusions to her desirability and by her hypnotic words encouraging Julian to give himself to Alice. In the final scene of the play, as Julian lies dying and is being comforted by Miss Alice, the Lawyer begins an irrelevant reminiscence about a sonnet that he once wrote which was described as having "all the grace of a walking crow." (TA, p.168)

In Tiny Alice, the Lawyer becomes "fully aware" of the counterpoint of his words with those of the other characters and deliberately aids the effect, thus creating a juxtaposition of the trivial and the agonies of death which is comparable to that created by the interaction of the Nurse and Jack in the final scene of The Death of Bessie Smith. In the play All Over the pattern of interruptions also is significant. Most of the interruptions of other characters' speeches are made by the Son and Daughter in attempts to gain their mother's attention. However, their interruptions are ineffective in getting any response from their mother except more abuse. Their interruptions are as ineffectual as their lives are.

Counterpoint, with the resulting humorous, ironic, or poignant juxtaposition, is the basis of all aspects of Albee's play Box-Mao-Box. The interwoven, repetitive, thematically interrelated speeches of the four characters fulfill Albee's plan for the play of applying "musical form to dramatic structure." (Box, p.7) The structure of the play is comparable to that of a sonata, fulfilling the necessary and sufficient conditions included in a very basic definition of that musical form:

An extended composition for solo instruments, in which the various movements have a unity of subject and style but differ in tempo, rhythm, and melody. The solo parts of the four characters are orchestrated in a way that develops both the theme and the counterpoint. What results from the juxtaposed fragments of the solos of the four characters is counterpoint between East and West; between life and death; among the past, the present, and the future; among what is, what will be, and what could have been; among self-righteous optimism, self-willed oblivion, self-pity, and self-awareness; among the rational, the semi-hysterical, and the maudlin; and among three varieties of cant.

Although the three characters on stage and the voice from the box are meant to demonstrate simultaneous but not necessarily interrelated existences, and although Albee explicitly states in his stage directions preceding the play that none of the characters are supposed to respond to one another, the separate speeches of the characters do seem to be comments on each other. For example, the Old Woman recites a line from the poem asserting that when she was young, strong, and beautiful, no one even suggested that she might ever be in the way. The next words of the play are spoken by the Long-Winded Lady and seem to be a wry response to the Old Woman's plight: "You never know until it's happened to you." (Box, p.58) One of the many other comparable examples of interplay results among the words of Mao, the voice from the box, and the Long-Winded Lady:

CHAIRMAN MAO: The only ones who crave war and do not want peace are certain monopoly capitalist groups in a handful of imperialist countries which depend on aggression for their profits.
LONG-WINDED LADY: Do you.
VOICE, FROM BOX: Box.
CHAIRMAN MAO: Who are our enemies? Who are our friends?
LONG-WINDED LADY: Do you?

In this interplay of supposedly unrelated speeches, the Long-Winded Lady appears to throw Mao's words directly at the audience member, asking him to respond personally to the words, forcing him to acknowledge his own allegiances.

However, an even more effective juxtaposition concludes the play Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, which makes up the middle section of the larger play Box-Mao-Box. Mao's increasingly forceful and bloodthirsty calls to action culminate in a command for the people of the world to unite in a holy crusade against the "U.S. aggressors and all their running dogs" (Box, p.118) in a revolutionary war requiring many lives and great self-sacrifice. At the same time, the pathetic reminiscences of the Long-Winded Lady, the symbol of modern Western civilization, conclude in a twisted cliché which is an admission of futility:

> CHAIRMAN MAO: People of the world, unite and defeat the U.S. aggressors and all their running dogs.
> LONG-WINDED LADY: [. . .] no; I have nothing to die for. (Box, p.118)

The ambiguity of the Long-Winded Lady's statement--implying not only that her life is so empty that there is nothing left which will give meaning either to her life or to her death but also suggesting that there is no object, idea, or ideology worth the sacrifice of the life of a human being--serves as an ironic contrast to the absolutism of Mao's words and ideas. However, the words of the two dissimilar characters have one thing in common; death is the subject of both statements. All four interwoven voices in Box-Mao-Box are bound thematically by the idea of death. Stylistically, their unifying trait is repetition.

Within each of Albee's plays, particular words, phrases, and images recur, possibly influencing the audience member's reactions to the play even before he becomes consciously aware of the pattern of repetition. Repetition, the third of Albee's major verbal patterns, is common to all Albee's plays, from the ironic emphasis on the words "understand" in The Zoo Story and "satisfaction" in The American Dream to the insistent hammering away by the word "death" in both Box-Mao-Box and All Over. However, within some of the plays, the use of the technique is particularly effective. For example, in the play The Zoo Story, variations of the word "understand" punctuate the conclusion of Jerry's recitation of "The Story of Jerry and the Dog." Jerry makes one direct plea to Peter, "Please understand, Peter" (ZS, p.33), as he attempts to explain his desire "to make a beginning . . . to understand and just possibly be understood . . . a beginning of an understanding [. . .] ." (ZS, p.35) He asserts that he and the dog have achieved a sad understanding:

> [T]he dog and I have attained a compromise; more of a bargain, really. We neither love nor hurt because we do not try to reach each other. And, was trying to feed the dog an act of love? And, perhaps, was the dog's attempt to bite me not an act of love? If we can so misunderstand, well then, why have we invented the word love in the first place? (ZS, p.36)

In response to Jerry's long, anguished story, Peter repeats the phrase "I don't understand" (ZS, pp.36-37) three times, almost inevitably creating symbolic echoes by reminding one of the three denials of Christ by Saint Peter. Like Saint Peter, this modern-day Peter does not understand because of fear. An understanding of Jerry's words would bring him self-awareness. This kind of knowlege would require that Peter throw off old habits for a new, totally involving, vulnerable stance in life, and his vested interests are too great to allow him

to make such a change. Therefore, Jerry describes Peter as a "vegetable" because of this refusal to be fully human; he no longer is an animal that responds to pain and pleasure and that changes and develops. Jerry sarcastically admonishes Peter: "fight for your manhood, you pathetic little vegetable." (ZS, p.47) Only as he lies dying, killed by the knife that Peter held in his hand, does Jerry change his evaluation of Peter: "I'll tell you something now; you're not really a vegetable; it's all right, you're an animal. You're an animal, too." (ZS, p.49)

This contrast between animal and vegetable states of being is important in the play. Animals never appear on stage, but references to animals recur throughout the play. The play begins with Jerry's repeated assertion, "I've been to the zoo," and the word "zoo" is used more than thirty times thereafter. Peter jokingly asks if he is Jerry's "guinea pig" for the day and explains that his household includes two parakeets, two cats, but no dogs. Jerry tells of mixing rat poison into a hamburger, bought as "a bite for his pussy-cat" (ZS, p.32), in order to try to kill a dog. Jerry refers to this dog more than forty times, in terms ranging from the childish ("the bow-wow" or "puppykins") to the sinister ("a black monster of a beast" or "malevolence with an erection"). Furthermore, he insists that his landlady, the owner of this dog, has eyes like those of her dog. Peter explains that he must go home because the parakeets are preparing his dinner and the cats are setting the table, just as Jerry frequently interchanges the animals, human and otherwise, that order Peter's life. Jerry asserts that Peter has never "had anything more trying to face than changing [his] cats' toilet box" (ZS, p.45), which may explain his apathetic state. Finally, the repeated use of terms referring to animals culminates in Jerry's

description of the pervasive stench of the zoo which is inhabited by barking seals, screaming birds, and hungry lions and in his explanation of why he went to the zoo and what he found there:

> I went to the zoo to find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too. It probably wasn't a fair test, what with everyone separated by bars from everyone else [. . .] . But, if it's a zoo, that's the way it is. (ZS, pp.39-40)

People have begun to exist like the animals in the zoo, trapped in tiny, connected rooms that resemble zoo cages and separated by both visible and invisible barriers that make contact very difficult. However, although animals have claws and fangs with which to attack and kill, they also are capable of affection, loyalty, and devotion. If man is to break out of the zoo that has become his world, he must re-learn these most basic, positive animal responses. However, if interaction with human animals is too difficult at first, then "where better to make a beginning [. . .] than with A DOG." (ZS, p.35) Jerry tries to explain this to Peter:

> [I]t's just that if you can't deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS! Don't you see? A person has to have some way of dealing with SOMETHING. If not with people . . . if not with people . . . SOMETHING. (ZS, p.34)

The "zoo story" that Jerry in his indirect manner tries to relate to Peter teaches that all men are equally trapped but that relief is possible, not by withdrawing, as Peter has attempted, but by making contact. Because Peter persistently refuses to acknowlege the common animality (humanity) of all men, Jerry stages his own death at the hands of Peter, forcing Peter to revert to the lowest, most essential level of animal behavior. Jerry's scream as he is stabbed is "the sound of an

infuriated and fatally wounded animal" (ZS, p.47), as he thereby accomplishes the revelation to Peter of Peter's own state as just another vulnerable, lonely "animal": "We hear 'OH MY GOD!' as an off-stage howl--the final proof of Peter's animality, but also of his humanity, since he howls to his God."[11]

Comparable effectiveness is achieved in the play The Death of Bessie Smith through the repetition of particular words--"hot," "sick," "tired," "want," "realities," "promises," "action"--and by the ironic contrast that results from the recurrent dual imagery of the play, that of "movement on the one hand and rest, inertia, and fixity on the other."[12] The setting for the play is a southern city on a hot fall evening. In the first scene of the play, Jack complains, "My God, it's hot" (BS, p.26), and the word "hot" recurs throughout the play, emphasizing the seething corruption and stagnation both in the lives of the characters and in their environment. In the second scene of the play, the Nurse's sick father asserts that he is "sick and tired" of her disparagement of his friendship with the Mayor, who lies sick in the hospital. The Nurse's repeats her blunt response to her father's protests and complaints and empty threats two times: "You make me sick." (BS, pp.33-34) The Nurse ridicules her father on his pretensions to power and influence, tells the Orderly that he "had better acquaint himself with some realities" (BS, p.41) and lectures the Intern on "economic realities" (BS, p.55). However, when he, in turn, suggests the falsity of the Nurse's pretensions to a famous family name and social power, she angrily claims that she alone is "fully aware of what is true and what is not true." (BS, p.57) Similarly, the word "want" is repeated throughout the play on several different levels of meaning. For example, the Orderly insists that he

wants only what has been promised; the Nurse fulfills her wants by sending the Intern for her coffee and the Orderly for her cigarettes; and Jack is forced to make futile repetitions of his expression of need, that he wants help for Bessie.

All of these separately repeated words and ideas are brought together in the key speech of the play, in which the Nurse verbalizes the pain of all people who are forced to exist in the state of extreme imbalance that results from the disparity between their desires and the reality of their situations:

> Well, let me tell you something . . . I am sick of it! I am sick. I am sick of everything in this hot, stupid, fly-ridden world. I am sick of the disparity between things as they are, and as they should be! [. . .] I am sick of going to bed and I am sick of waking up. . . . I am tired . . . I am tired of the truth . . . and I am tired of lying about the truth . . . I am tired of my skin. . . . I WANT OUT! (BS, pp.70-71)

All the characters in the play repeatedly assert that they are "going" to do something that will resolve the dissonance by changing their situations, but the execution of the particular actions almost never occurs. Verbs denoting action predominate in the characters' vocabularies. They repeatedly speak of "driving," "moving," and "doing" things, and variations on the literal and the idiomatic meanings of the verb "to go" occur more than sixty times during the one-act play. The characters most frequently use the verb in two of its basic meanings: "to go," indicating motion away from the place where one is, and "going to," indicating one's intention to do something and denoting the state of inaction prior to action. Jack talks both to Bernie as the two men sit in a bar and to Bessie who lies inert in a drunken sleep about "goin'" North to New York City, where Bessie will make her successful come-back as a singing

star. The Nurse and her father use the verb "going" in the sense of intention fifteen times in the second scene of the play, as they spitefully attack each other's pretensions:

> NURSE: What are you going to do, Father? Are you going to sit here all afternoon on the porch, with your headache, and watch the car? Are you going to sit here and watch it all afternoon? You going to sit here with a shotgun and make sure the birds don't crap on it . . . or something?
>
> FATHER: I'm going to need it. (BS, p.31)

And the Father, frustrated and angry, yells at the Nurse four times to "go" away. The Negro Orderly at the hospital speaks to the Nurse of his desire to "go" beyond his present menial position and tells her that she "goes" much too far in her continual abuse of him. Jack is told by the Nurse to "go" to another hospital to find help, but the Intern decides to take a risk and offer Jack aid for Bessie: "All right . . . we'll go see." (BS, p.73) Over the Nurse's repetitious commands to him, "DON'T GO OUT THERE!" (BS, p.74), and her repeated threats that she is "going to" fix him, the Intern finally chooses to execute the one significant action of the play.

Until this point, the repetition of the verb of action and movement had served only to emphasize the actual inertia of the people and the stagnation of the situation; until this decision by the Intern, the Nurse had been correct in asserting that "everything is promises . . . and that is all there is to it: Promises . . . . nothing more!" (BS, p.42), and in disparaging the Orderly's belief in "action." The dissonance created in the audience member's mind by the verbal insistency on movement and action, which is in strong contrast with the psychological and the physical immobility of the characters, is only minimally relieved by the Intern's abortive attempt to act to save Bessie Smith's

life. Nonetheless, as Paul Witherington points out in his article "Language of Movement in Albee's The Death of Bessie Smith," the movement imagery and dialogue, in contrast to the actual inactivity of the characters on stage, actually serve to unify the play thematically, "dramatizing in each scene humanity's prevailing inertia and purposelessness but also humanity's occasional chance to act with direction and force."[13]

The kind of action that occurs most frequently in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is indicated by the frequent recurrence of the word "game," which appears more than thirty-five times in the play. As the games intensify and move from the first to the second and third degrees, the frequency of the appearance of the word also intensifies. The destructiveness of the relationship between husband and wife in each of the two couples and the unnaturalness of the present environment--in which dishonesty has become the norm, in which men are impotent and women cannot or will not bear children, and in which games to attain power, position, and money are incessantly played--are emphasized by the recurrence of the word "sick" throughout the play. Honey spends most of her time in the play either explaining her sickness or being sick: "I throw up . . . I mean, I get sick . . . occasionally, all by myself . . . without any reason. . . . (Proudly) I've always done it." (VW, p.119) Nick, the pragmatic scientist, and George, the humanistic historian, angrily assert that each makes the other sick. George and Martha exchange the same information on several occasions, either with great contempt or with black humor:

> MARTHA: (To GEORGE) Well, who do you think [made Honey ill] . . . Sexy over there? You think he made his own little wife sick?

GEORGE: (Helpfully) Well, you make me sick.
MARTHA: THAT'S DIFFERENT! (VW, p.118)

The two accuse each other of telling "desperately sick" lies, and their declaration of total war is preceded by their mutually bitter recriminations:

GEORGE: (As if she were some sort of bug) No . . . no . . . , you're sick.
MARTHA: (Rises, screams) I'LL SHOW YOU WHO'S SICK! (VW, p.153)

During this scene in which the word "sick" is an epithet which repeatedly is hurled by George and Martha at each other, Martha "snaps her fingers," shouts "SNAP!" and asserts that "It's snapped, finally. Not me . . . it. The whole arrangement." (VW, p.156) From this point on in the play, "snap"--as gesture, sound, and word--repeatedly occurs.[14] Martha repeats the word and the sound seven times, once even rhyming it with "crap," as she describes her disgust with George and her intent "to make the biggest damned explosion you ever heard." (VW, p.158) Comparably, something appears to "snap" within George as Martha goes off to the bedroom with Nick. When George returns to the house in Act Three of the play, he carries "a great bunch of snapdragons" which he thrusts in the door while ominously chanting, "Flores; flores para los muertos. Flores." (VW, p.195) The flowers pass from person to person. George, "flourishing the flowers," exclaims, "SNAP WENT THE DRAGONS!!" (VW, p.202). Later, he throws the snapdragons spear-like, one at a time, at Martha and Nick, shouting "SNAP!" as he hurls each flower. And his answer to Martha's assertion that he does not know the difference between truth and illusion is full of foreboding:

(Without throwing anything) SNAP! (Silence) You got your answer, baby? (VW, p.204)

Finally, George's elaborate manipulation of the word ends as he twice derisively snaps his fingers at Nick: to send him for Honey and to demand Nick's acknowledgment that he wants to play the final game, "Bringing up Baby." As Ruby Cohn explains, "snap" becomes "a stage metaphor in the destruction of lies, which may lead to truth. . . . St. George slew the dragon; Albee's George slays [illusions] with hothouse snapdragons and the word 'snap.'"[15]

The final game in the play, which ends all the illusions at least for a while, is entitled "Bringing up (with its multiple meanings of introducing a subject, nurturing and educating a child, and vomiting) Baby." The word "baby" has insistently figured in the dialogue of the play; most frequently, it has been applied to adults, with either sexual or sarcastic overtones. Only in the midst of this final destructive game does the word acquire the possibility of a literal referent in reality as Honey cries out, "I want a child. I want a baby." (VW, p.223) As this final game ends, other changes in word usage also occur. The consistent repetition of the word "no" and of negative assertions begins to decrease. The final discordant duet between George and Martha is only tentatively positive, but George's firm use of the word "no" occurs only twice, as he denies Martha's requests for a return to illusions in order to fill the emptiness in their lives:

GEORGE: It will be better . . . maybe.
MARTHA: I'm . . . not . . . sure.
GEORGE: No.
MARTHA: Just . . . us?
GEORGE: Yes.
MARTHA: I don't suppose, maybe, we could . . .
GEORGE: No, Martha.
MARTHA: Yes. No. (VW, pp.240-241)

All the characters in Albee's play A Delicate Balance are attempting to maintain their states of equilibrium by a comparable simultaneous yes/no approach to life. The most frequently recurring words and images in the play are those of steadiness and balance. Agnes accurately asserts that she rarely varies, that both joy and sorrow affect her equally and evenly, and that "there are no mountains in my life/. . . nor chasms. It is a rolling, pleasant land. . . ." (DB, p.19) Tobias gives ironic affirmation to her claim: "Do you know that Agnes has . . . such wonderful control I haven't seen her cry in . . . for the longest time . . . no matter what." (DB, p.32) Claire recognizes Tobias's comparable state as she calls him "predictable, stolid Tobias" (DB, p.26); and his daughter Julia declares that for many years she has thought of him as a "cipher," as a "very nice but ineffectual, essential, but not-really-thought-of, gray . . . non-eminence." (DB, p.71) The image of grayness and dullness recurs in Claire's dream that Tobias will eventually rescue all of them from "the regulated great gray life, dwindling before [them]," and take them "to where it is always good and happy." (DB, p.78) Although Agnes's statement which follows implies that she recognizes the bleakness of their lives, nonetheless, she perceives her job as that of the fulcrum. She makes a balanced, steady existence possible for the family, even if mere "balance" and stasis is destructive: "When we keep something in shape, we maintain its shape--whether we are proud of that shape, or not, is another matter--we keep it from falling apart." (DB, p.88) This carefully maintained balance, which sustains their lives filled with guilt, frustration, boredom, and loneliness, is mocked by Claire at the end of the play:

> We have our friends and guests for patterns, don't we?--known quantities. The drunks stay drunk; the Catholics go to Mass, the bounders bound. We can't have changes--throws the balance off. (DB, p.150)

The balance is briefly upset by the arrival of Harry and Edna, the best friends of Tobias and Agnes. The words "friend" and "friendship" are used more than thirty times in the play, as Tobias tells the parable of the cat that was his friend, as the characters affirm their positions as mutual best friends, and as they later discuss the demands and limits of friendship. In his long aria, Tobias questions, "Doesn't friendship grow to that? To love?" (DB, p.165) In this play, the characters sadly discover that this is not necessarily the case; the repetition of the words connoting love, sacrifice, trust, and intimacy--"friend" and "friendship"--serve only to increase the irony in the play. All the characters discover that their friendships, like their gray lives, want depth and meaning.

The word "want" also recurs throughout the play as Albee plays with the double meaning of the word, as "lack" and as "desire," two meanings which the Butler suggested in the play Tiny Alice. In A Delicate Balance, Albee exploits the ambiguity of the word "want" quite fully:

> Claire wishes Agnes to die but doesn't know whether she wants it. Hysterical, Julia shifts from "they [Harry and Edna] want" to "I WANT . . . WHAT IS MINE!" Agnes asks Harry and Edna pointedly: "What do you really . . . want?" And some minutes later, Edna replies, playing on the same verb: "if all at once we . . . NEED . . . we come where we are wanted, where we know we are expected, not only where we want." Harry insistently questions Tobias: "Do you want us here?" And in Tobias' final aria, he shifts from: "I WANT YOU HERE!" to "I DON'T WANT YOU HERE! I DON'T LOVE YOU! BUT BY GOD . . . YOU STAY!"[16]

Tobias wishes to upset the balance that has been maintained between the friends for forty years and test the limits of friendship, but Harry and

Edna choose to leave. The paradoxical balance of "want," that is, of lack and desire, will be maintained. The morning breaks as Harry and Edna leave, and the "regulated great gray life" begins once again to dwindle away before the other characters. Appropriately, Agnes's words praising balance and order conclude the play:

> And when the daylight comes again . . . comes order with it. [. . .] Come now; we can begin the day. (DB, p.175)

In Tiny Alice the character Julian is described as "walking on the edge of an abyss, but is balancing." (DB, p.103) However, he can have that balance upset quite easily and can be pushed either towards the "light" of Truth or into the "darkness" of fear, withdrawal, and illusions. Julian longs for the light of absolute faith and surety and thinks this can be achieved through his service: "The house of God is so grand . . . it needs many servants." (TA, p.57) He longs for great service; in fact, he desires to be a sacrifice to his conception of God which differs from the image of God as a loving, caring being: "Soft God? The servant? Gingerbread God with the raisin eyes?" (TA, p.104)

The nouns "service" and "servant" and the verb "to serve" recur throughout the play. Each character serves some power above himself: Julian serves the Cardinal, and both men serve God and the Church. The Butler tells Julian, "I am at your service" (TA, p.30), and the Lawyer appears to serve Miss Alice; however, the two men and Miss Alice are merely servants of Tiny Alice. As Julian is left as some sort of "sacrifice" to Tiny Alice, the trio tell him, "You have brought us to the end of our service here." (TA, p.155) And, if the idea of concentric levels of reality is carried even further, Tiny Alice may be

merely the servant of some even larger, greater power. Julian persists in believing that he has, in the light of Truth, chosen his form of service to God, but the Lawyer insists that this is merely Julian's illusion:

> Dear Julian; we all serve, do we not? Each of us his own priesthood; publicly, some, others . . . within only [. . .] . Predestination, fate, the will of God, accident . . . all swirled up in it, no matter what the name. And being man, we have invented choice, [. . .] But we do not know. Anything. End prologue. (TA, p.154)

Julian thinks that he has achieved the greatest "sense of service" (TA, p.135) through joining what he calls "God's light" to the light of human love:

> But then I judge it is God's doing, this . . . wrenching of my life from one light to another [. . .] though not losing God's light, joining it with . . . my new. (He is like a bubbling little boy) I can't tell you, the . . . radiance, humming, and the witchcraft, I think it must be, the ecstasy of this light, as God's exactly; the transport the same, the lifting, the . . . the sense of service, and the EXPANSION. [. . .] the blessed wonder of service with a renewing, not an ending joy--that joy I thought possible only through martyrdom, now, now the sunlight is no longer the hope for glare and choking in the dust and plummeting, but with cool and green and yellow dappled . . . perfumes . . . (TA, pp.134-135)

However, at the end of the play Julian learns that his service, his sacrifice, is to be made through his acceptance of Tiny Alice, whose "rooms are lighted" (TA, p.156) to welcome him. As he lies alone dying, he asks if he is in the light or in the darkness: "IS IT NIGHT . . . OR DAY?" (TA, p.181). The only answer to his question is the movement of the lights in the model as, simultaneously, "a great shadow, or darkening, fills the stage." (TA, p.183) His prayer to God to "lighten my eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death" goes unanswered: "JULIAN dies." (TA, p.184) The curtain falls on a totally black stage.

Julian believes in God, and he also finally accepts Alice. Nonetheless, he ends in darkness, which, according to Albee, can be interpreted in either of two ways: "Either the abstraction personifies itself, is proved real; or the dying man, in the last necessary effort of self-delusion, creates and believes what he knows does not exist."[17] The ambiguity that characterizes the tone, action, and imagery of the play continues in the conclusion of the play. The only thing that is absolute is the fact of Julian's death.

In Albee's two most recent plays, Box-Mao-Box in 1968 and All Over in 1971, the disparate speeches and stories of the characters in each play are unified by images, ideas, and words that point towards death. In Box-Mao-Box repetition becomes the strongest form of emphasis. For example, Mao repeatedly states the direct opposition between communism and imperialism, peace and war, and revolution and reaction as his speech builds in intensity to his final indirect call for worldwide deaths, via war. The Old Woman does not recite her poem straight through; she repeats lines and stanzas of "Over the Hill to the Poor-House." This poem concludes with the persona's admission, in the final lines of the otherwise rather stout-hearted poem, of defeat:

> So they have shirked and slighted me, an' shifted me about--
> So they have wellnigh soured me, an' wore my old heart out;
> But still I've borne up pretty well, an' wasn't much put down,
> Till Charley went to the poor-master, an' put me on the town.
> (Box, p.112)

Similarly, during her rambling narrative, the Long-Winded Lady repeats particular phrases, images, and words, but the most frequently recurrent ones deal with dying and death. Ruby Cohn succinctly describes the situation:

> More and more, the theme of death links her disparate associations; uncle, sister, and husband speak of death, and her husband was aware of the perpetual process of dying before he was attacked by the agonizing cancer that killed him. Though his dying is now over, "his death stays." And it is with that death that the Long-Winded Lady lives, having no communion with her daughter, and no relationship with anyone else.[18]

The Voice emanating from the box repeats words, images, lines within the speech, and even part of the speech itself in the final section of the play entitled "Reprise," which means a repetition or recapitulation. The Voice states that "we all died when we were thirty once. Now, much younger. Much." (Box, p.27) And the Voice laments the self-annihilating tendency of the species in which seven hundred million babies died, "said no instead of hanging on. Apathy, I think. Inevitability." (Box, pp.20-21) Now, the Voice suggests, man is willing to die rather than face the extent of his corruption. The final image of the play, verbalized by this disembodied voice, describes the situation of modern man vividly: A flock of birds, "a black net . . . skimming," flies towards destruction, with a single figure moving beneath, "in the opposite direction." (Box p.125)

All Over immediately picks up the subject, because the first words of the play consist of the Wife's question to the Doctor: "Is he dead?" The Doctor declares that "Death is such an old disease" (AO, p.24). And, when the Daughter cries out in fear and agony, through clenched teeth, "Death; death; death; death; death . . ." (AO, p.73), the Nurse's rejoiner is only partially a flippant quip: "Death, yes; well it gets us where we live, doesn't it," (AO, p.74) The Wife explains why she could not allow the Husband to die wired up in the hospital. The Nurse tells the story of Dr. Dey's suicide. The Doctor

tells of his work with the prisoners in the death cells and recounts facts about the medieval plagues. The Wife tells the story of her aunt whose heart died. The words "dying," "die," "death," and "killing"--along with synonyms and variations such as the words "murder," "go down," "closing down," "snuffed out," and "homicide"--recur more than fifty times in the play. The play concludes with a final synonym for "death," noting the death of the Husband: "All over." (AO, p.111)

The play is set in a death chamber in which a group of nameless figures wait. There is no possibility of a following generation; the children have not reproduced. All the characters have been dying slowly, spiritually and psychologically, since their abrogation of responsibility for the creation of meaning in their own lives. They shifted the responsibility to the Husband, who lies dying. His literal, physical death reflects their spiritual deaths, just as the physical death of Bessie Smith in Albee's earlier play mirrored the spiritual deaths of the Nurse and the Orderly. The characters in All Over live indecisively and self-destructively. Since death is all that the characters can see as a means of ending their continual, individual pain, they become fascinated by it:

> THE DOCTOR: I was completing what I had begun before: how we become enraptured by it . . . by the source of our closing down. You see: I suddenly loved my executioners . . . well, figurative [sic]; and in the way of . . . nestling up against them, huddling close--for we do seek warmth, affection even, from those who tell us we are going to die, or when. (AO, pp.31-32)

The repetition of the word "death" in Albee's latest play All Over, comparable to the repetition of other key words in his other plays, clearly demonstrates that the language of the plays is highly structured and carefully manipulated--through repetition, counterpoint, and set

speeches and stories--to affect the audience member and force him to perceive the non-communication among the characters in the plays. The lack of communication results, at least in part, from two quite broad patterns that the characters follow: First, they talk but frequently do not appear to listen to other characters, to understand, or to respond in an appropriate or desirable manner. On occasion, characters do not answer even the most direct questions. Second, the characters frequently appear to ignore unity or consistency in the ideas under discussion. Contradictions, non-sequiturs, inappropriate statements, paradoxical assertions, unexpected questions, and ambiguous pronoun usage contribute to the lack of complete coherence in the characters' verbal exchanges.

The entire play The American Dream is composed of examples from this second pattern. For examples, connective words that imply a particular logical relationship may be used to join sentences that do not seem to fit the pattern called for, as is demonstrated by an exchange between Grandma and Mommy. When Grandma enters carrying her stacks of neatly wrapped boxes, Mommy asks, "Whatever are they for?":

> GRANDMA: That's nobody's damn business.
> MOMMY: Well, in that case, put them down next to Daddy; there. (AD, p.63, my underlining)

The purely mechanical nature of the characters' feelings of affection for each other are emphasized by the wooden assertions of love, in inappropriate places, made by the characters. For example, following their attack on Grandma for reading Mommy's Book Club selections and their unsympathetic discussion of her approaching senility and death, both Mommy and Daddy appear to feel obliged to assert their love for

Grandma. However, the incongruity of the expression of love serves only to emphasize the real lack of feelings:

> MOMMY: Don't you worry about it; Grandma doesn't know what she means.
> DADDY: She knows what she says, though.
> MOMMY: Don't you worry about it; she won't know that soon. I love Grandma.
> DADDY: I love her, too. (AD, p.65)

Equally wooden expressions of love are exchanged between Mommy and Daddy, again suggesting that they feel obligated to comply with the well-known form of conjugal love even if they do not actually possess the feelings that should underlie the words:

> DADDY: At any rate, you're very well provided for.
> MOMMY: You're my sweet Daddy; that's very nice.
> DADDY: I love my Mommy. (AD, p.68)

In several instances, the characters in The American Dream emphasize the non-communicative nature of their language in their exchanges in which a character's words from one speech are directly contradicted or undercut by the words in his next speech. This self-contradiction is particularly apparent in the exchange between Mommy and Daddy in which Mommy first attacks Daddy for wanting to put Grandma in a nursing home and, following his denial, asserts, "Well, heaven knows, I would!" She bemoans Grandma's hard labor around the house but then asserts that Grandma should do the work because "you can't live off people." She plans her life with Grandma following Daddy's death--far in advance of the actual time of Daddy's death--and then states her desire that Grandma should be sent away before that time:

> MOMMY: . . . I have a right to all your money when you die. And when you do, Grandma and I can live by ourselves . . . if she's still here. Unless you have her put away in a nursing home.
> DADDY: I have no intention of putting her in a nursing home.
> MOMMY: Well, I wish somebody would do something with her! (AD, p.67)

A similar four-sided, non-logical exchange occurs among Grandma, Mommy, Daddy, and Mrs. Barker--as Daddy changes from the victim of the attack to a villain; as Grandma interprets Mrs. Barker's inane comments as a defense and then as an attack, with equal lack of justification in each case; as Mommy moves from an attack on Grandma to an attack on Daddy; and as Grandma moves from attacking Mommy to defending her:

> MOMMY: You stop listening to her; she'll say anything. Just the other night she called Daddy a hedgehog.
> MRS. BARKER: She didn't.
> GRANDMA: That's right, baby; you stick up for me. [. . .]
> MRS. BARKER: Did you really call him a hedgehog?
> GRANDMA: Oh look; what difference does it make whether I did or not?
> DADDY: Grandma's right. Leave Grandma alone.
> MOMMY: (To DADDY) How dare you!
> GRANDMA: Oh, leave her alone, Daddy; the kid's all mixed up. (AD, p.89)

Further examples from the second pattern are seen in the abrupt, unprepared-for questions that occur throughout all the plays. For example, early in the play The Zoo Story, Jerry asks a brusque, unexpected question of Peter, "Have I been walking north?" He continues to disconcert Peter throughout the play with similarly abrupt questions, attempting to break down Peter's conditioned, impersonal responses by the shock effect of his language. In contrast, in The Death of Bessie Smith, the Nurse's irrelevant questions to Jack, who has brought Bessie's mangled, bleeding body to the hospital, are part of the Nurse's attempt to remain hidden from contact with life behind her official admissions desk and behind bureaucratic procedure. As Jack painfully relives the horror of the automobile accident in his narrative to the Nurse, she asks him questions that clearly show her complete lack of compassion: "You took off? . . . You took off from an accident? [. . .] You probably

got police looking for you right now . . . you know that?" (BS, p.76)

Similarly, George's abrupt questions to Nick appear to be a diversionary tactic. Whenever a subject arises in the conversations between the two men which relates to George's position in the History Department, to Martha's father, to the college, to George's background, or to some other issue that is very painful to George, he talks about it briefly and then abruptly changes the subject by asking Nick a seemingly unrelated question: "How old are you?" "How much do you weigh?" "Do you play handball?" "How old is your wife?" "Your wife doesn't have any hips . . . has she . . does she?"

George's questions also demonstrate the ambiguous pronoun usage that sometimes occurs in the speech of the characters. In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, for example, George and Nick's discussions of their wives frequently become quite confused because of the indefinite pronoun reference:

> GEORGE: Martha is a remarkable woman. I would imagine she weighs around a hundred and ten.
> NICK: Your . . . wife . . . weighs . . .?
> GEORGE: No, no, my boy. Yours! Your wife. My wife is Martha.
> NICK: Yes . . . I know. (VW, p.36)

A similar exchange occurs later in the play, initiated by George's question, "Where's Martha?":

> NICK: She's making coffee . . . in the kitchen. She . . . gets sick quite easily.
> GEORGE: Martha? Oh no, Martha hasn't been sick a day in her life, unless you count the time she spends in the rest home. . . .
> NICK: No, no; my wife gets sick quite easily. Your wife is Martha.
> GEORGE: (With some rue) Oh, yes . . . I know. (VW, p.89)

The confusion creates humorous dialogue, but it also suggests the confusion of alignments that will result in the play, as Martha and Nick join forces to attack George and as George uses Honey to attack Martha.

Examples from the first pattern of non-communication also frequently occur throughout the plays, as the characters do not listen, understand, or respond in the desired ways. For example, the following sequence from The Zoo Story vividly illustrates the attributes of the first pattern, as Jerry appears not to hear Peter's remarks or appears to misunderstand and thus respond in an inappropriate way:

> JERRY: You have T.V., haven't you?
> PETER: Why yes, we have two; one for the children.
> JERRY: You're married!
> PETER: Why, certainly. [. . .]
> JERRY: And you have a wife.
> PETER: (Bewildered by the seeming lack of communication) Yes!
> JERRY: And you have children.
> PETER: Yes; two. (ZS, p.15)

In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, George and Nick engage in a comparably unproductive conversation. George asks Nick, "Do you believe that people learn nothing from history?" He then does not give Nick a chance to answer but, instead, goes directly into an attack on science, which concludes with the assertion, "You didn't answer my question about history." (VW, p.37) Later in the play, both men engage in similar exchanges: first questions, followed by refusals to answer, which are immediately followed by answers to the original questions. For example, George expresses his reluctance, but real need, to talk about the incidents that may have taken place in his youth in the following exchange:

> NICK: What . . . what happened to the boy . . . the boy who had shot his mother?
> GEORGE: I won't tell you.
> NICK: All right.
> GEORGE: The following summer, on a country road, with his learner's permit in his pocket and his father on the front seat to his right, he swerved the car, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a large tree. (VW, p.96)

In a similarly structured exchange, Nick shows his need to confess his reasons for marrying Honey:

> NICK: We were talking about my wife's money . . . not yours.
> GEORGE: OK. . . . talk.
> NICK: No. (Pause) My father-in-law . . . was a man of the Lord, and he was very rich. (VW, p.108)

Even more disturbing examples of the first pattern of non-communication are seen in the frequent instances in the plays in which characters obviously do hear and understand the words of other characters, but in which they deliberately refuse to accept the meanings of the words because acceptance and understanding would demand that they see the problems and make the requisite changes in their existing situations. As Claire explains in A Delicate Balance, they cannot allow changes in their beliefs about the world because that would "upset the balance." Thus, in The Zoo Story, Peter's response to Jerry's long, emotion-filled story is incomprehension, which may be self-willed:

> I . . . I don't understand what . . . I don't think I . . . (Now, almost tearfully) Why did you tell me all of this? [. . .] I DON'T UNDERSTAND! [. . .] I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ANYMORE. (ZS, pp.36-37)

Similarly, Julian refuses to hear the Lawyer's insulting words about the Cardinal:

> JULIAN: I will not . . . I will not concern myself with . . . all this.
> LAWYER: You're quite right: bow your head, stop up your ears and do what you're told. (TA, p.40)

Tobias, in A Delicate Balance, consistently evades responding to requests from other characters and accepting responsibility, even though he obviously does hear the pleas and protests of the other characters and understands what they are asking from him.

Honey, in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, physically tries to avoid hearing words that will upset her assumptions and preconceptions which are necessary for the maintanence of the delicate balance in her life. Her withdrawal from confrontation with any disturbing words begins in the play when she covers her ears and protests, "Dear, you mustn't . . . you mustn't . . . you mustn't" (VW, p.69), following Nick's sarcastic assertion that in the procedure of genetic control he will be "a personal screwing machine!" Typically, Martha responds, "Isn't that nice." Equally as typically, Honey responds, "Such language. It's . . . ." Honey refuses to understand the meaning of George's words as he talks to her about the very old, very familiar "dance" that Nick and Martha are doing: "I . . . I don't know what you mean." (VW, p.131) And, later in the play, when Nick and Martha have gone off together, Honey again refuses to hear George's words:

> GEORGE: You know what's going on in there, little Miss? Hunh? You hear all that? You know what's going on in there?
> HONEY: I don't want to know anything! [. . .] I . . . don't . . . understand . . . you. [. . .]
> GEORGE: You don't want to know, do you? You don't want to listen to it, hunh?
> HONEY: I don't want to listen to you. . . . I want to know who rang [the door chimes].
> GEORGE: Your husband is . . . and you want to know who rang? (VW, pp.178-179)

At the end of the play, even after the hideous games of "Humiliate the Host," "Get the Guests," and "Hump the Hostess" have been played out, Honey returns from her most recent attack of sickness and, in the face of all that has gone before, makes the following assertion:

> I've decided I don't remember anything. [. . .] I don't remember anything, and you don't remember anything, either. [. . .] You heard me, nothing. (VW, p.211)

George sarcastically questions her, "It's just some things you can't

remember . . . hunh?" However, she straightforwardly explains: "Don't remember; not can't." (VW, p.211)

This kind of self-willed lack of understanding interferes with the effectiveness of communication just as the characters' refusal to follow the rules of language and logic does. However, these are not the only tactics used by the characters in their attempts to hide behind language. In each of the plays the characters discover that the words of other characters may not be true. Words can be used to tell a lie just as easily as they can be used to state the truth. Words may become ineffective in helping a person get information straight, because of individuals' differing perceptions of the same situation and because of deliberate distortions of the truth. Words may hinder, not help, a person as he attempts to distinguish truth from illusion. This particular kind of misuse of language begins in The Zoo Story, when Jerry describes his recurring lie to his landlady about their lovemaking and as he modifies his assertion that his story of "Jerry and the Dog" has something to do with how it is sometimes necessary to go a long way out of one's way in order to return a short distance correctly--"or maybe I only think it has something to do with that." (ZS, p.30)

In The American Dream, Grandma warns Mrs. Barker against placing trust in another person or in his words:

> MRS. BARKER: Grandma, I feel I can trust you.
> GRANDMA: Don't be too sure; it's every man for himself around this place. . . . (AD, p.95)

Both Grandma and the Young Man reaffirm the possibility that words can be used to tell lies. Following Grandma's preposterous story of winning "twenty-five thousand smackerolas" by entering Uncle Henry's Day-Old Cake in a baking contest held in a large barn, the following exchange takes place:

YOUNG MAN: Is all this true? Do you want me to believe all this?
GRANDMA: Well, you can believe it or not . . . it doesn't make any difference to me. (AD, p.112)

Similarly, following the Young Man's story of his emotional mutiliation, he adds, "Be careful; be very careful. What I have told you may not be true." (AD, p.115)

In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, the characters who perceive that games are being played at every level of interaction also become progressively more aware of the ways in which words can be manipulated. For example, Nick questions the truthfulness of George's story about Martha's stepmother, precipitating this exchange:

GEORGE: (Considersit) Well . . . maybe it isn't true.
NICK: (Narrowing his eyes) And maybe it is.
GEORGE: Might be . . . might not. (VW, p.110)

And in the final act of the play, after many games have been played and many stories have been narrated, George and Martha assert that deception and confusion are the intent of their words:

MARTHA: That is not true! That is such a lie!
GEORGE: You must not call everything a lie, Martha. (To NICK) Must she?
NICK: Hell, I don't know when you people are lying, or what.
MARTHA: You're damned right!
GEORGE: You're not supposed to. [. . .] Truth and illusion. Who knows the difference, eh, toots? Eh? (VW, pp. 199-200, 201)

Even in the play All Over in which the characters are generally grimly serious and in which one is less unsure about the truthfulness of the information about people and events, similar exchanges occur. For example, following the Nurse's story about Dr. Dey's suicide, the Wife says, "I don't believe a single word you've told us." The Nurse does not even attempt a defense; she merely responds, "I don't care."

(AO, p.29) Following the narration by the Mistress concerning her grandfather who had "the eyesight of a turkey buzzard," the Wife again questions another character's words and learns that words are not used truthfully:

> THE WIFE: It's not true, is it!
> THE MISTRESS: No; not a word of it! (AO, p.48)

Finally, in the face of all the evidence, one must conclude that among the characters in Albee's plays language is nearly always ineffective except in its capacity to create confusion and to create or compound pain. Although words appear to have lost their power to transmit information or to express emotions and desires, words still can be used to wound, and that at least allows some form of contact to be made between the characters, albeit painful contact. Therefore, in nearly every play, there are accomplished verbal duelists whose skill in attack--ranging from light, quick, malicious witticisms to heavy-handed, bitter brutalities--is equivalent to their unexpressed desire for positive contact and communication.

The best examples of this kind of thrust-and-parry interaction are provided by Grandma and Mommy, the Nurse and the Intern, Martha and George, George and Nick, Agnes and Claire, the Lawyer and the Cardinal, the Lawyer and Miss Alice, and the Wife and both her Daughter and Son. Mommy and Grandma's exchanges remain on the less brutal level of witty viciousness, never going further than Grandma's alliterative assertion that Mommy is a "tramp and a trollop and a trull to boot," and Mommy's indignant response: "You stop that! You're my mother, not his!" (AD, p.69) In contrast, many of the exchanges between the Nurse and either the Orderly or the Intern in The Death of Bessie Smith

are embryonic versions of the brutal verbal attacks that are to follow between characters in Albee's later plays. In the case of the Nurse's attacks on the Negro Orderly, the abuse is solely one-sided because the white Nurse is free to attack the Negro man on any grounds and in any manner, whereas he is totally powerless to retaliate because of the very real threat of devastating physical or economic reprisals.

However, in nearly every other instance in the plays, the abuse is equal on both sides of the interaction. The Nurse's barrage of sadistic, mutually demeaning abuse that she hurls at the Orderly--using ugly and degrading labels and calling him "a genuine little a[illegible]s-licker," an "Uncle Tom," and a "white nigger"--is equalled by some of the later reciprocal exchanges between Martha and George, the Lawyer and the Cardinal, and the Wife and her Daughter. The attacks in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? begin as the play itself begins, with Martha calling George a "cluck" and a "dumbbell." The attacks range through more epithets--some even in French--insults, and humiliating stories, steadily increasing in viciousness and violence. The play Tiny Alice also begins with violence and viciousness as the Lawyer and the Cardinal exchange heavy-handed insults in Scene One:

> CARDINAL: You were a swine at school. A cheat in your examinations, a liar in all things of any matter, vile in your personal habits--unwashed and indecent, a bully to those you could intimidate and a sycophant to everyone else. We remember you more clearly each moment. It is law you practice, is it not? We find it fitting. [. . .]
>
> LAWYER: Overstuffed, arrogant, pompous son of a profiteer. And a whore. You are in the Church, are you not? We find it fitting. (TA, p.7)

The Lawyer's exchanges with Julian continue in the same insulting way, attacking the Cardinal, Julian's faith and obedience, and everything else

that gives meaning and order to Julian's life. Even in his interactions with Miss Alice, the Lawyer's words remain cold and abusive:

> MISS ALICE: (Calm, quivering hatred; almost laughing with it)
> I have a loathing for you that I can't describe.
> LAWYER: You were never one with words. (Suddenly brutal)
> NOW, COME HERE. (TA, pp.71-72)

The same insistent vehemence is evident in nearly every verbal interaction between Agnes and Claire in A Delicate Balance, epitomized in the following exchange:

> AGNES: Why don't you go off on a vacation, Claire, now that Julia's coming home again? Why don't you go to Kentucky, or Tennessee, and visit the distilleries? Or why don't you lock yourself in your room, or find yourself a bar with an apartment in the back. . . .
> CLAIRE: Or! Agnes; why don't you die? (DB, p.42)

As these examples illustrate, in both the one-sided attacks and in the thrust-and-parry verbal exchanges, the weakest, least defensible part of one's opponent is known and becomes the target. Therefore, Jerry bases his attacks on Peter around Peter's bench, which is the symbol of his retreat from life, and his "manhood." Comparably, in the vicious exchanges between the Nurse and her father in The Death of Bessie Smith, each attacks the one part of the other's life that affords him any pleasure or sense of identity. She ridicules his pretensions and his pose as a "big politician" and friend of the Mayor, and she calls him a "hanger-on . . . a flunky." (BS, p.32) The father's reciprocal attack points up the real nature of her relationship to the Intern, her "boy friend," as a one-dimensional, sexual relationship that is unworthy of romanticized idealizaton. The Nurse attacks the intelligent and ambitious Orderly's ambivalent position in the "no-man's-land" between the races: "on the one hand shunned and disowned by your brethren, and on the other an object of contempt and derision to your

betters." (BS, p.47) For the same reasons, she attacks the Intern's dreams of great heroism and service in the Spanish Civil War. He, however, is able to reciprocate with an attack on the Nurse's purported sexual purity, which she has used as a control in their relationship.

George and Martha also attack each other's dominant illusions and deepest fears. Martha ridicules George for both his academic and his artistic failure, while George reveals that Martha's father, whom she adores, "really doesn't give a damn whether she lives or dies, [and] couldn't care less what happens to his only daughter." (VW, p.225) And, finally, George destroys Martha's most cherished illusion--their son. With comparably devastating effectiveness, George exposes Nick's weakest points, the greed and consuming ambition that allow him to demean himself completely in his climb to power:

> NICK: I . . . I have no respect for you.
> GEORGE: And none for yourself, either. . . . (Indicating MARTHA) I don't know what the younger generation's coming to. [. . .]
> NICK: You're disgusting.
> GEORGE: (Incredulous) Because you're going to hump Martha, I'm disgusting? (He breaks down in ridiculing laughter) (VW, p.172)

In Tiny Alice, Miss Alice's only effective attacks on the Lawyer result from her manipulation of his uncontrollable jealousy and from her analysis of his inability to feel and express emotion: "[. . .] your body is as impersonal as your self--dry, uncaring, rubbery . . . dead. Ah . . . there . . . that is what I loathe about you most: You're dead. Moving pushing selfish dry dead." (TA, p.74) His most effective attacks against her, on the other hand, arise out of her real feeling for Julian, whom she knows must die. In All Over, all the characters appear to be as "dead" as the Lawyer, but the Wife's most

devastating attacks against her children are against their particular ineffectuality, smallness, and lovelessness. She viciously attacks in them the things that she despises in herself. Their counterattacks are weak in comparison.

Since the characters in Albee's plays are seen to be fascinated with the uses of language in general, and since invective and insult are the only effective uses of language among the characters, there is real appreciation shown in the plays for a character's skill in creating the best-turned insult or the most devastating rebuttal. This reaction is first illustrated in the Intern's response to the Nurse, following her violent outburst in which she declares that his "neck is in the noose . . . and I have a whip . . . and I'll set the horse from under you . . . when it pleases me" (BS, p.63):

> INTERN: (Stares at her for a moment) You impress me. No matter what else, I've got to admit that. (BS, p.64)

In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Nick makes an accurate analysis of the exchanges between Martha and George--"Oh, you two don't miss . . . you two are pretty good. Impressive." (VW, p.92)--and states his reaction to this perverse skillfulness:

> NICK: No, it's that sometimes I can admire things that I don't admire. Now, flagellation isn't my idea of good times, but. . . .
> GEORGE: . . . but you can admire a good flagellator . . . a real pro.
> NICK: Unh-hunh . . . yeah. (VW, pp.92-93)

The scoring of particularly outrageous or audacious verbal hits appears to be the only way in which George and Martha can make contact with each other in their advanced stages of alienation. Whenever either of the two can outmaneuver the other one in a verbal exchange, they both

usually pause and then laugh. For example, this sequence occurs when Martha is unable to think of the proper word to finish her abuse of George:

> MARTHA: you're such a . . . such a simp! You don't even have the . . . the what? . . .
> GEORGE: . . . guts? . . .
> MARTHA: PHRASEMAKER! (Pause . . . then they both laugh) (VW, p.14)

And a similar sequence recurs during later attacks:

> GEORGE: (With boyish pleasure . . . a chant) I'm six years younger than you are. . . . I always have been and I always will be.
> MARTHA: (Glumly) Well . . . you're going bald.
> GEORGE: So are you. (Pause . . . they both laugh) Hello, honey.
> MARTHA: Hello. C'mon over here and give your Mommy a big sloppy kiss. (VW, p.15)

Between the Lawyer and the Cardinal, equally effective verbal duelists, mutual respect exists. The Lawyer is described as giving "a smile to a hated but respected adversary," and the Cardinal returns to the oblique compliment when the Lawyer creates a particularly imaginative and well-phrased insult:

> CARDINAL: (A burst of appreciative laughter) You're good! You are! Gutter, but good. (TA, p.7)

Claire, in A Delicate Balance, suggests her awareness of Agnes's skillfulness at verbal abuse when she tells Tobias that she does not know how to respond most appropriately to Agnes's devastating speeches: "I have never known whether to applaud or cry, or, rather, I never know which would be the more appreciated--expected." (DB, p.24) In All Over, the Mistress does actually applaud one of the Wife's speeches, and she gives the Wife her due as one who can ravage with words: "Listening to you was a capping on it, I suppose: God; that was effective as you did it [. . .] ." (AO, p.36)

Those who excel in the witty or brutal thrust-and-parry dialogue desire an opponent who is worthy of their imaginative insults, one who can reciprocate in kind and can keep the game going at such an intense and involving level that one must keep his attention focused on the verbal game and is thus unable to think about the reality of his problematic situation. Therefore, just as Jerry tries to ensure an even physical battle between himself and Peter by slapping Peter repeatedly until he is uncontrollably enraged and by giving Peter a knife to use in the fight, George rejects Martha's plea for tenderness and an end to verbal battles and repeatedly, lightly slaps her until she also is enraged. He wants her to be equally as involved as he is in their final verbal game:

> GEORGE: Pull yourself together! I want you on your feet and slugging, sweetheart, because I'm going to knock you around, and I want you up for it.
> MARTHA: All right, George. What do you want, George?
> GEORGE: An equal battle, baby; that's all.
> MARTHA: You'll get it!
> GEORGE: I want you mad.
> MARTHA: I'M MAD!!
> GEORGE: Get madder!
> MARTHA: DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT!
> GEORGE: Good for you, girl; now, we're going to play this one to the death. (VW, pp.208-209)

George also insultingly snaps his fingers at Nick and at Honey to draw them back into the final battle. Similarly, in Tiny Alice, after the Lawyer has worn down the Cardinal in their verbal contest, he tries to get the Cardinal back up for the final assault: "Regird yourself. We are about terminated. (Quick, insulting finger-snaps) Come! Come! Back up; back up on your majesty! Hup! (TA, p.19)

No character is allowed to withdraw from the verbal encounters in the way that they have withdrawn from life. The characters' refusal

to face reality, their tight personal insularity, and their fear make most of them unwilling and very nearly unable to make meaningful contact with each other, because contact would require that they expose their human vulnerability; and, like the Son in All Over, they have spent most of their adult lives attempting to suppress their human vulnerability and "getting set against everything, fobbing it all off, covering [their] shit as best [they] can." (AO, p.83) However, since some kind of contact is absolutely necessary, the characters have begun to take a kind of perverse pleasure in their verbal attacks and counterattacks, because even if the only emotions that are being generated are disgust, hatred, or pain, at least they can feel something and can know that they are still alive as human beings. But there is danger in resorting to this final, extreme misuse of language, as the Mistress explains in a long speech to the Daughter in All Over:

> What words will you ever have left if you use them all to kill? What words will you summon up when the day comes, as it may, poor you, when you suddenly discover that you've been in love--[. . .] Love with mercy, I mean, the kind you can't hold back as a reward, or use as any sort of weapon. What vocabulary will you have for that? Perhaps you'll be mute; [. . .] or maybe it will be dreamlike for you--nightmarish--lockjawed, throat constricted, knowing that whatever word you use, whatever phrase you might say will come out, not as you mean it then, but as you have meant it before, that "I love you; I need you," no matter how joyously meant, will be the snarl of a wounded and wounding animal. (AO, pp.64-65.

When, because of misuse, words once have lost their power to communicate, they may never again be able to regain that lost power. It is the same with a person's words as it is with a person's level of humanity and compassion: "there are limits. [. . .] you can't reverse yourself . . . [and] start back up once you're descending." (VW, p.51)

When characters in Albee's plays want or need meaningful words to express the extremity of their emotions, there are few words left that still have power and can be used. Hence, from The Zoo Story to All Over, when characters are at the height of both physical and emotional states, they are forced to resort to the use of nearly non-human sounds and noises and to the most simple, unambiguous words in order to achieve expression and release. In The Zoo Story, for example, Jerry's impalement on the knife held in Peter's hand is accompanied by a scream, which is "the sound of an infuriated and fatally wounded animal" (ZS, p.47). The final sound that Peter makes as he flees like a frightened, pursued animal is described as "a pitiful howl": "OH MY GOD!" (ZS, p.49) At the end of The Death of Bessie Smith, when the Nurse's carefully defended pretenses and dreams have been nearly completely destroyed, she is reduced to tuneless singing--"almost keening." (BS, p.80) Wails of great grief and pain are her final resort as she realizes the extent of the emptiness of her life. In The Sandbox, Grandma never directs words towards Mommy and Daddy; it is as if she knows in advance that words will be powerless to reach and affect them. Her strongest expressions of rage at her mistreatment by Mommy and Daddy are made using sounds that are "a cross between a baby's laugh and cry": "Ahhhhhh! Graaaaa!" (SB, p.11)

In the same way, when George finally admits to himself the extent of the pain and destruction that have resulted from the spiteful, hateful games that he and Martha have forced each other to play, he finds no words that can express the intensity of his feelings, even though he is the most articulate character among a group of very highly articulate characters. The stage directions describe George's actions in the following way:

> He stands still . . . then, quickly, he gathers all the fury he has been containing within himself . . . he shakes . . . he looks at the book in his hand and, with a cry that is part growl, part howl, he hurls it at the chimes. They crash against one another, ringing wildly. (VW, p.174)

Martha's final cry of defeat, when she learns of the death of their fantasy son, is comparable:

> GEORGE: Now listen, Martha: listen carefully. We got a telegram; there was a car accident, and he's dead. POUF! Just like that! Now, how do you like it?
> MARTHA: (A howl which weakens into a moan) NOOOOOOooooo. (VW, p.233)

At the conclusion of the play, the dialogue is simplified drastically, consisting of monosyllabic responses. C. W. E. Bigsby offers a possible explanation for this reduction of the virtuosity of the language of George and Martha at the conclusion of their complicated games:

> The violent rhythm and splendid articulateness of the linguistic battles give way to a slow and simple dialogue which mirrors the uncomplicated state to which their relationship has returned.[19]

And in the play All Over, as in the other plays, the one character who has demonstrated the most skill at using and manipulating words in order to achieve whatever destructive effect she desires finally is forced to react with "a beast's voice." Emitting "an animal's sound; rage, pain," the Wife protects the man she loves and attacks those who would intrude: "AARRRGGGHHH." (AO, p.53) Just as Julian's final speech, his long, circuitous death speech, concludes with a simple assertion that is mostly composed of monosyllabic words, "God, Alice . . . I accept thy will" (TA, p.184), the final speech by the Wife also loses its characteristic verbosity and self-conscious convolutions. Out of the depths of her loneliness, fear, and pain, one simple, straightforward assertion "explodes from her": "Because I'm unhappy."

(AO, p.110) All that follows this assertion are the Doctor's words, a warning and a lament: "All over." (AO, p.111)

In each of his plays, Albee presents characters who are unhappy and whose unhappiness, dissatisfaction, and want (both in the sense of "lack" and of "desire") result from the loneliness, which is self-imposed in many instances, of their existences. Skillfully combining a typically American idiom, formal speeches, monologues, and witty or malicious repartee, Albee dramatizes human situations in which characters are unable, despite their loquacious virtuosity, to make contact and thereby relieve that loneliness. Jerry tries to make contact with Peter, but he is not understood. George sincerely tries to warn Nick against being sucked down into the quicksand of self-deceit and illusions. He sincerely tries to give Nick a "survival kit" (VW, p.115), but verbal games and dishonesty have become so much the norm in relationships that Nick is unable to perceive the honesty of George's attempt at contact and communication, and those two words become the target of contempt and derision:

> GEORGE: I've tried to . . . tried to reach you . . . to. . . .
> NICK: (Contemptuously) . . . make contact?
> GEORGE: Yes.
> NICK: (Still) . . . communicate?
> GEORGE: Yes. Exactly.
> NICK: Aw . . . that is touching . . . that is . . . downright moving.. . . that's what it is. (With sudden vehemence) UP YOURS! (VW, p.116)

And Tobias, in A Delicate Balance, also sadly discovers the ineffectuality of even the most sincere effort to communicate, after a certain point of withdrawal has been reached. His aria at the end of A Delicate Balance is one of the most intense and desperate pleas and one of the

most poignant statements of man's need in modern drama. Nonetheless, Tobias ends up alone.

Most of Albee's characters use language that has become as ineffectual as are their actions, their relationships, and their lives in general. Although the words and gestures remain which express social hospitality, friendship, family feeling, parental affection, sexual attraction, and love, the actual feelings which would give substance and meaning to the words and actions no longer exist--killed by guilt, fear, passivity, acceptance of the mutilated "American Dream" and by many of the other self-destructive forces working in modern man. Albee's presentation of this pervasive ineffectuality is not meant to suggest that the situation is hopeless. Instead, his vivid presentation represents an attack on the abuses of language that have helped to make this situation possible and an attack on inauthentic responses to the situation, such as trying to cover up the loss of meaning with a brilliant but empty profusion of words. His plays are an attack on the fact that form has become more important than meaning.

Throughout the plays, there is a progressive move towards more highly artificial speech, more heavy-handed and less imaginative verbal attacks, and more convoluted, complex sentence structure. Some speeches in All Over are so full of parentheses and modification that they become nearly undecipherable. As Arthur K. Oberg asserts, the language of the plays moves steadily towards "lyrical incomprehensibility and hinting understatement."[20] Words substitute for action with increasing frequency, and there is less and less idea of any vitality or relationships beyond the words. The use of quotation in the characters' speech increases until it peaks in Box-Mao-Box, in which almost half of the dialogue is

quotation; Mao's words come from the Red Book, and the Old Woman's words consist of her repetitious recitation of "Over the Hill to the Poor-House." Spontaneous speech decreases.

However, as was the case with the move towards stasis in the settings and toward less hope in the lives and relationships of Albee's characters, the move towards less vital and less effective language is not an admission of defeat. Albee is not simply dramatizing the fatalistic assertion that, given modern man's present state of extreme alienation, communication is no longer possible. Instead, he is depicting the worsening situation that he perceives to exist. Through the depiction of the unhappiness pervading the lives of these characters who talk brilliantly but who are, nonetheless, unable to reach each other, he implies that a different state is preferable. That state is more nearly like that of George and Martha in the final moments of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, when they have gone beyond any use of clichéd ideas and expressions and have stopped all verbal games and, finally, are responding to each other as the vulnerable, lonely human beings that they really are.

This minimal suggestion of a different and more honest state, even if it is in some ways quite painful, counteracts all accusations of fatalism and nihilism in Albee's work. The dissonance created in the minds of the audience members by the characters' profuse, self-conscious dialogue that accomplishes no communication or positive contact and by the carefully structured language that generally is successful only in increasing the characters' pain and loneliness is meant to result not in despair, but in eventual positive changes outside the theatre situation in the language of real people.

Chapter Four: Theme

In his attempt to stimulate dissonance that may eventually lead to change and amelioration, Albee joined the major modern American playwrights--O'Neill, Rice, Hellman, Odets, Miller, and Williams, among others--in their various and varied attempts to elucidate clearly and forcefully the problems permeating the American way of life. In the preface to The American Dream, in words that also apply to the other plays that he has written, Albee discusses his purposes for writing and his antipathy to the status quo:

> The play is an examination of the American scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity; it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen. . . . The American Dream is a picture of our time--as I see it, of course. (AD, pp.53-54)

In each of his plays, through his use of sets, props, characterization, and language, Albee clearly demonstrates three major thematic concerns, which are suggested in his words from the preface to The American Dream. First, the plays present a physical and moral "picture of our time"; Albee vividly presents what he sees currently existing on several levels in "this slipping land of ours," that is, unhappiness, pervasive dissatisfaction, and "want," in both the senses of "lack" and "desire." Second, Albee's plays attempt to demonstrate that man's past refusal to face reality is the main cause of the present very problematic and

painful state in which modern American man finds himself; "complacency, cruelty, emasculation, and vacuity" are only a few of the negative results of man's "substitution of artificial for real values" and man's withdrawal from a confrontation with reality. And, third, Albee's plays suggest what man must do to change his quite bad situation; Albee's most important thematic concern is with advocating the necessity of man's confrontation with and acceptance of reality.

In order to present his first thematic concern, Albee examines the current American scene and describes what he sees. As depicted by Albee, men and women have become perverted images of the traditional conception of ideal American manhood and womanhood. Nearly all the men in the plays are emasculated, weak, indecisive, and generally ineffectual. Each fits Martha's description of George as "the shadow of a man flickering around the edges of a house." (VW, p.226) From Peter in The Zoo Story to the Son in All Over, most of the men in the plays resemble Tobias in A Delicate Balance, who has sunk, according to his daughter Julia, "to cipher, and you've stayed there, I'm afraid--very nice but ineffectual, essential but not-really-thought-of, gray . . . non-eminence." (DB, p.71) Similarly, Martha tells George in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, "I can't even see you . . . I haven't been able to see you for years. [. . .] I mean, you're a blank, a cipher [. . .] a zero." And she further indicates his weakness by her threat: "I swear . . . if you existed I'd divorce you." (VW, p.16) The apparent physical and the suggested sexual impotence of these men in Albee's plays is indicative of their emotional and moral impotence. Daddy, in The American Dream, best illustrates this pervasive weakness; his mysterious operation left him with "tubes now, where he used to have tracts" (AD, p.90) and with the general desire "to get everything over with." (AD, p.70) Daddy does not want to do anything;

he wants to remain uninvolved, as do Peter, Nick, Tobias, Julian, the Son, and the Best Friend. He wants to reconsider everything before committing himself to any action that will result in possible changes in his situation, which is bad but at least familiar. Like the other men in the plays, instead of choosing immediately to act, he prefers to "examine aallllll the interpretations of aallllll the implications" (DB, p. 100); consequently, Daddy does not want to let Mrs. Barker, and the possibility of disruption and change, into the apartment: "I think we should talk about it some more. Maybe we've been hasty . . . a little hasty, perhaps. I'd like to talk about it some more." (AD, p.73) He acts only when driven to action by Mommy, who deceives him into believing that he did make a choice in a "firm," "decisive," and "masculine" manner. (AD, p.74)

Throughout Albee's plays, the women are shown to be both the villains and the victims in the emasculation of the American male. Nearly all would agree with Martha's explanation of their paradoxical position in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?: "I'm loud, and I'm vulgar, and I wear the pants in this family because somebody's got to, but I am not a monster. I am not." (VW, p.157) Nonetheless, on the surface at least, many of the women appear to have become spiteful, aggressive, selfish, and sometimes even lecherous. George depicts Martha as "spoiled, self-indulgent, willful, dirty-minded, [and] liquor-ridden" (VW, p.157); and Tobias compares the women in his household to three witches who "sit down and watch [him] carefully; smoke [their] pipes and stir the cauldron; watch." (DB, p.141) The most decimating and obscene epithets and curses are spoken by the women in the plays. The women are cruelest to other people; they treat their parents and children with the most hostility.

The brutality, coarseness, and cunning of the female characters in Albee's plays is in direct opposition to the American stereotype of the ideal woman, and the women in Albee's plays do not enjoy the role that they have been forced to play. The women hate both the men and themselves because of what both of them have become. Martha, in one of her most violent and most self-revealing rages, threatens to make George sorry that he "ever let himself down" (VW, p.173) and, implicitly, that he ever let her down in her expectations for his success. Similarly, Agnes berates Tobias for his betrayal of himself which, in the process, resulted in his betrayal of her:

> AGNES: The theory being pat: that a half loaf is worse than none. That you are racked with guilt--stupidly!--and I must suffer for it. (DB, p.144)

The women recognize what they have become, and they attack in other people those qualities that they despise in themselves. For example, the Nurse in The Death of Bessie Smith attacks the pretensions and dreams of the men around her--her father, the Intern, and Orderly--because she finds herself unable to face life bereft of her own pretensions and illusions. She attacks the Orderly the most brutally because he has effected the most complete self-betrayal among the men. In fact, he is the Nurse's inverted image, the reverse product of the same social, cultural situation. Like the Nurse, he is both the product (victim) and the perpetuator (villain) of that situation; thus, she attacks in him what she hates in herself. Hatred is, for the Nurse, easier to live with than shame is. Comparably, the Wife in the play All Over attacks the smallness and lovelessness of both the Son and the Daughter. She attacks the Best Friend's mistreatment of and insensitivity toward his spouse. She attacks the unhappiness of all those

around her; however, all the attacks are against those things that also exist in her and which wrench from her the final admission of her total misery in life:

> THE DAUGHTER: (After a bit; not loud, but bitter and accusatory) Why are you crying!
> THE WIFE: (It explodes from her, finally, all that has been pent up for thirty years, It is loud, broken by sobs and gulps of air; it is self-pitying and self-loathing; pain, and relief) Because . . . I'm . . . unhappy. (AO, p.110)

In the interactions among Albee's weak male and discontent, aggressive female characters, the men are "all flops" and the women feel only self-disgust, desiring escape. The sexual relationships, both in and out of marriage, are frustrating and unsatisfying to both the men and the women. The marriages are pointless, empty, sterile relationships that drag the characters through the kind of unhappiness described by Martha in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?:

> [. . .] sick nights, and the pathetic stupid days, through the derision and the laughter . . . God, the laughter, through one failure after another, one failure compounding another failure, each attempt more sickening, more numbing than the one before [. . .]. (VW, p.227)

Of course, the few children produced by these sad relationships are equally as sad; George asserts that the child that he and Martha created "is, deep in his gut, sorry to have been born." (VW, p.227) Agnes, in A Delicate Balance, asserts that the men and women unavoidably see themselves "repeated by those we bring into it all, either by mirror or rejection, honor or fault" (DB, p.90), and the children do reflect precisely the weaknesses of their parents in each of Albee's plays. In The American Dream, for example, the concern of Mommy and Daddy is completely with maintaining the appearance of things--satisfaction, marriage, ambition, affection, and so on; they are intent

on maintaining the facade of propriety and the attainment of success in their lives. They know what the image of the "American way of life" includes, and they want to maintain the appearance of living out "the American dream." However, they do not want the trouble of working toward achievement of the real dream with its mandatory acceptance of responsibility for oneself and other people and its requirements of original and decisive thought and action. Consequently, the second bumble that they receive, who is young, well-built, and "almost insultingly good-looking in a typically American way" (AD, p.107), is far more acceptable to them as a son than the first totally vulnerable and human bumble that they received, even though the second bumble readily admits that he has "no talents at all, except what you see . . . my person; my body, my face. In every other way I am incomplete" (AD, p.113); that he will "do almost anything for money" (AD, p.109); and that he no longer has the capacity to feel anything: "I have no emotions. I have been drained, torn asunder . . . disemboweled." (AD, p.115) Appropriately, the Young Man wants to become a star in Hollywood movies, in the ultimate world of illusion, where all is controlled, and the satisfaction of a happy ending is guaranteed. This good-natured, good-looking paradigm of masculinity is, at the same time, empty both in body and mind and a symbol of death, not of life or the perpetuation of life. However, because he fulfills the image that Mommy and Daddy desire to maintain, they gladly accept him. All facade and no substance, he is, to Mommy and Daddy, "really top notch; much better than the other one." (AD, p.125)

In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, George and Martha's fictive son is a "bean bag" in their destructive games and a weapon in their

continual attacks. He clearly is a mirror of the state of their relationship. He is, according to George, disturbed by Martha's vulgarity and possessiveness and, according to Martha, ashamed of George's failures and weakness. The perfection that Martha ascribes to him and the structure of her description of him--"walk[ing] evenly between us . . . a hand out to each of us for what we could offer by way of support, affection, teaching, even love . . . and these hands, still, to hold us off a bit for mutual protection, to protect us all from George's . . . weakness . . . and my . . . necessary greater strength . . . to protect himself . . . and us." (VW, p.222)--suggests the strong and deep affection that does exist between Martha and George while it laments what their relationship has become. The state of the lives of Julia in A Delicate Balance, the daughter of the Long-Winded Lady in Box-Mao-Box, and the Son and Daughter in All Over similarly mirror the states of their parents' existences. All of these children are morally weak personalities, wholly unlovable and unable to express their need and love; they hide in repeated marriages and affairs, in spitefulness, masochism, and withdrawal from reality. They refuse to accept responsibility for the deplorable state of their own lives. The last strong, admirable human beings existed two generations back. The people have become progressively weaker and more alienated. These children do reflect the lives of their parents, like the distorting mirrors of a carnival funhouse, with exaggerated and grotesque--yet all too recognizable--images.

Since the men, women, and children who comprise the family structure are in these debased conditions, the institution of the family can no longer be seen as the sacred, inviolable structure that it once purported

to be. Husbands and wives do not love or respect each other; parents and children do not love or respect each other. The family interrelationships are empty of genuine love and loyalty, and the structure is maintained only to fulfill the demands of social propriety. The emptiness of the institution is demonstrated throughout Albee's plays. For example, Peter, in The Zoo Story, confuses his references to his wife and children with his references to the household pets. The Nurse and her father in The Death of Bessie Smith speak to each other only in order to make repeated, ugly attacks on each other. Grandma, in both The Sandbox and The American Dream, is treated by Mommy and Daddy as if she were an object, to be disposed of when she becomes no longer useful to them; and between Grandma and Mommy, her daughter, invective is the usual form of verbal exchange, practiced with great malicious care. Similarly, in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Martha's father "doesn't give a damn whether she lives or dies." (VW, p.225) In A Delicate Balance, Julia directly insults her father and indirectly attacks her mother, of whom she is justifiably afraid, while Tobias admits that he has "taken out on my only daughter the . . . disgust of my declining years." (DB, p.110) Agnes simply shrugs and coldly asserts, "Julia is a fool." (DB, p.110) In All Over, nearly every exchange between the Wife and her Son and Daughter is recriminatory, and every exchange is painful. Consistently throughout the plays, the family relationships between husband and wife and between parents and children--the most basic, essential, and influential relationships--are unsatisfactory; therefore, one is not surprised to discover that other aspects of the society are distorted or empty of meaning.

Thus, one sees that the characters observe social formalities, accept their stereotyped roles, and perform the mandatory social rituals, but their adherence is somehow distorted and is devoid of feeling or

meaning. In The American Dream, for example, Mommy and Daddy exercise great care in following socially acceptable patterns of behavior and in using socially acceptable euphemisms, but their actions involve physical and emotional mutilation and castration. In A Delicate Balance, "friend" and "friendship" are two words that are used repeatedly throughout the play. Characters exchange expressions of friendship; Agnes and Tobias and Harry and Edna all assert that they are best friends. But the action of the play reveals that these are merely words that have no real meaning for the characters. Friendship for Tobias and Harry means someone to listen to Bruckner with, and someone "to tell you're sick of golf." (DB, pp.30-31) To Agnes and Edna, it means someone with whom to go into town. Tobias finally is forced to admit to Harry, "The fact I like you well enough, but not enough . . . that best friend in the world should be something else--more--well, that's my poverty." (DB, p.166) In All Over, the action of the play, the deathwatch for a man by his family and friends, constitutes the observance of one of the rituals and customs that give order and regularity to society but that, in reality, now have no meaning beyond the form itself. Other rituals and customs--such as the wife's right to determine the manner in which the body will be disposed of, the attendance by the same long-time family doctor at the death, and family celebrations and reunions at Christmas and other holidays--are discussed and have been or will be adhered to. However, given the facts of the situation, with parents who do not love each other and who carry on affairs, with children who, simultaneously, desperately need and hate their parents, and with parents who can feel only shame and regret for their children, the total irrelevance and emptiness of the forms become ineluctably apparent.

These characters in Albee's plays, who live in their enclosed worlds--with empty family relationships, social relationships and institutions, rituals, and language--frequently are described in the stage directions as speaking and acting with great weariness. Maintenance of a facade to cover the emptiness that characterizes every area of their lives is debilitating. Also, their want--their lack and desire--and their pain bring on this pervasive weariness, and their emotional pain is equally as pervasive as the emptiness. In every play, in a set speech, at least one character verbalizes the weariness, pain, and emptiness felt by all the characters in the face of their lonely, meaningless lives. Jerry's narration of "The Story of Jerry and the Dog," the Nurse's speech in The Death of Bessie Smith in which she expresses her total disgust and exhaustion, and the speech made by the American Dream boy to Grandma, explaining that he has "been drained" of his ability to react as a human being, are clear examples of the characters' admissions of their unhappy states. In the same way, in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Martha admits in her monologue at the beginning of Act Three that all the characters in the play who pretend to the superiority of cynicism or of forcefulness are, in fact, weak and lonely:

> Daddy, you have red eyes . . . because you cry all the time, don't you, Daddy. [. . .] I cry all the time too, Daddy. I cry allllll the time; but deep inside, so no one can see me. I cry all the time. And Georgie cries all the time, too. (VW, p.185)

In Tiny Alice, the Lawyer--who, like the Nurse in The Death of Bessie Smith, maintains the most inpenetrable facade of strength and coldness--is also the character who most poignantly verbalizes the pain that encompasses all the characters: "Does it hurt? Does something finally hurt? [. . .] Everything! Everything in the day and night, eating,

resting, walking, rutting, everything. Everything hurts. [. . .] Inside the . . . sensibility, everything hurts. Deeply." (TA, pp.74-75)

Tobias's speech to Harry in A Delicate Balance similarly expresses all the weariness, fear, loneliness, guilt, hatred, agony, and indecision that comprise the lives of all the characters in that play; but the speech, like their lives, is ineffectual; it is brilliant in form and execution--an "aria"--but achieves nothing. The characters remain at the end of the play with the weary awareness of their own continuing "lack":

> EDNA: We shouldn't have come. [. . .] For our own sake; our own . . . lack. It's sad to know you've gone through it all, or most of it, without . . . that the one body you've wrapped your arms around . . . the only skin you've ever known . . . is your own--and that it's dry . . . and not warm. (DB, p.169)

Finally, in All Over, the words of the Daughter, describing herself as both "sated and . . . empty" (AO, p.58), and those of the Wife at the end of the play, screaming out her unhappiness, apply with equal validity to nearly every character in Albee's plays.

For the weary, pain-filled characters in Albee's plays, nearly every role, relationship, institution, custom, and ritual in which they participate has become a grotesque reversion of the usual image, resulting in extensive cognitive dissonance in the minds of the audience members. Throughout Albee's plays, America is shown to be the home of lonely, trapped, dissatisfied human beings who "want." The men have become nearly non-existent while the women, apparently, have become more dominant, coarse, and brutal. Marriages are loveless and sterile; families are unhappy; sexual contacts are characterized by frustration, combat, and perversity; friendships are based on and maintained by physical proximity and expedience and can exist only within

very limited boundaries, and friends are welcome in each other's homes and lives only if they come in "clean." (DB, p.156) Instead of the much-touted social and personal peace, social harmony, material success, and spiritual fulfillment that were supposed to come to define the American way of life, promiscuity, alcoholism, divorce, materialism, impotence, sterility, homosexuality, immaturity, racism, loss of religious faith, breakdown of the family, lack of communication, and general cruelty are the terms that, to Albee, more accurately describe the present state in "this slipping land"; and an examination of all the aspects of this state is the starting point for his plays.

Since he does not deviate from concern with the basic subject matter of most modern American plays--that is, psychological or psychoanalytical analyses of family structure and relationships, sexual relationships, and socially relevant issues--on the surface Albee's plays may appear to fit into the conventional American pattern. However, in his usual way, Albee ultimately uses and manipulates and transcends the conventional. His work may at first appear to be contemporary American social drama with a psychological bent, which leads the audience member to expect the conventional titillating exposé that usually concludes in one of several ways: with the naturalists' assertion that man is irrevocably trapped by his biological and environmental conditioning; with a rousing call to direct social action, as in the conventional social protest plays; with the assertion, as in Robert Sherwood's The Petrified Forest, O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh, or Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire, that man must be permitted his dreams and illusions in order to maintain his sanity and to survive in the brutal world; or with some other overly simple or deterministic conclusion which fulfills

the demand for unambiguous resolution and reassurance that has long been required of successful Broadway plays.

However, Albee's plays evolve into philosophical considerations of more universal moral dilemmas which merely happen to exist in the American social context. Albee goes beyond an examination of the immediately visible social symptoms such as divorce, loss of religious faith, alcoholism, and so on, to expose and implicitly attack the more basic, underlying moral disease of the culture. In his first play The Zoo Story, for example, the social starting point is an attack on middle-class conformity, closed-mindedness, and apathy and a consideration of class differences. Ironically, as the play begins, Peter, the epitome of middle-class man, is wiping his horn-rimmed glasses, which suggests his inability to see beyond the rigid boundaries that his life, attitudes, and vested interests have set up for him. But Albee soon goes beyond that too-easy attack to speak to the more basic evil of the cultural assumptions that make behavior such as Peter's and Jerry's possible. He depicts the confrontation between two ways of reacting to life; the two characters who represent the two kinds of reactions come from opposite social classes, but their confrontation is not structured primarily to point out the evils of social inequality. As Allan Lewis correctly states, the play rapidly "leap[s] beyond the surface revelations to a semiabstract metaphorical quality,"[1] taking the possibly unsuspecting audience member along with it. The audience member is forced to acknowledge that despite the minutely described realistic details, this interaction between Peter and Jerry has meaning far beyond the single dimension of social realism. Indeed, the real

concerns in the play are man's reaction to the pervasive reality of human separateness and the inexplicable, ambiguous nature of human love.

Similarly, Albee's main concern in The Death of Bessie Smith is not with racial discrimination. Of course, a technically illegal social and economic double standard as well as corruption in government are both suggested and shown throughout the play, but the play never degenerates into a racial or political polemic. An attack on the discrimination and corruption in the American South in the early part of the twentieth century would be pointless; most people have developed an automatic, impersonal sense of righteous indignation in the face of such blatant injustice. Albee's play attempts to oblige the audience member to see the problem in a much broader perspective, one beyond that of "bigot" versus "victims." Thus, in The Death of Bessie Smith, Albee's real concerns are with the lack of perception, empathy, and compassion that must exist in human beings before racism can begin to exist and with the debilitating cynicism that perpetuates the racism even after people have become aware of its all-encompassing destructiveness. All Albee's other plays also follow this same pattern: He is concerned with the distortion of the genuinely worthwhile ideals that underlay the original "American dream" and with the acceptance of a perverted value system, not with materialism. He is concerned with the inability of human beings to get outside their own skins and make contact with other people through genuine, selfless love, not with the clichéd ideas of "the breakdown of the family" or "the failure of communication." He is concerned with the desperate fear people have of facing the knowledge of their own imminent deaths and of the absolutely unfathomable

mystery of the universe, not with an attack on the Church or with an exposé of adultery, alcoholism, or decadence.

Albee's plays, which begin with the conventional subject matter of the modern American theatre but which go on to consider more universal problems facing man, provide none of the conventional conclusions; in fact, as indicated earlier, his plays end quite inconclusively. He calls for no particular social changes, because, obviously, to think that pervasive personal and social anomie can be eliminated by acceptance of a specific social theory or program is a gross over-simplification. Albee's plays advocate no particular, pragmatic plans of action and espouse no panaceas. Albee's position, as indicated in his plays, appears to resemble that of the Intern in The Death of Bessie Smith: "my dissatisfactions have nothing to do with loyalties. . . . I am not concerned with politics . . . but I have a sense of urgency . . . a dislike of waste . . . stagnation." (BS, p.59) And modern man, as presented throughout Albee's plays, is stranded in his stagnant, isolated, unhappy existence because of his own moral weaknesses.

Because his plays reach none of the decisive, usually optimistic conclusions that are generally associated with the popular and successful plays of the American theatre, Albee is accused by some critics of pure destructiveness, of attempting to facilitate the complete destruction in America of the already weak institutions of marriage, the family, organized religion, and so on, which have traditionally given form to American society. Others assert that his plays work to destroy any hope or dignity for mankind. For example, Richard Amacher's over-all evaluation in the final chapter of his critical work, Edward Albee, includes the following statement about Albee's work:

> . . . he has not really been an effective satirist; for he seems, in his plays, to lack belief that correction is possible. And so we are left with a feeling of absurdity and despair that can hardly be classified as a remedy for social ills.[2]

Similarly, Gilbert Debusscher draws mainly negative conclusions at the end of his book, Edward Albee: Tradition and Renewal, about the effect of Albee's plays: "Albee's work contains no positive philosophical or social message. His theatre belongs in the pessimistic, defeatist or nihilistic current which characterizes the entire contemporary theatrical scene." Debusscher further asserts that the statement of the plays is that there is no exit in life from isolation and meaninglessness, because "the images of death, of destruction and of sterility are the leitmotifs of [Albee's] entire body of work."[3] Richard Kostelanetz declares in The New American Arts that Albee's plays present "a sensibility whose intense and thorough negation is unprecedented in American theatre"[4]; and Robert Brustein claims in The Theatre of Revolt that Albee's plays are in protest against "existence itself," against "the insufferable state of being human."[5] In Albee's kind of plays, Brustein says, "nature, society, man no longer exist," and "revolt finds its most pessimistic, contracted, and exhausted form."[6]

One must of course agree that Albee does present a generally negative picture of the situations that he perceives to exist around him, in which people are unhappy and isolated, in which communication and contact are extremely difficult and infrequent, and in which traditional social institutions and beliefs have lost their significance and meaning and, thus, no longer can impose order and meaning onto men's lives. But he is not attempting to destroy the family, marriage, or religion, just as he is not advocating a specific social plan of

action or an escape into "pipe dreams." He avoids nihilism just as he avoids unfounded optimism. Albee clearly and vividly presents all the aspects of man's problem-filled situation, leaving final conclusions to be reached and judgments to be made by the individual audience members. His plays are meant to enable the audience member to see social situations in "this slipping land" in a much deeper and more inclusive perspective, to see them more perceptively than before. Of course, the implicit frame of reference for the paradoxical characters in their almost insoluble dilemmas is the necessity for social change, but the plays ultimately go beyond that first social level in order to function as modern parables or morality plays. The goal of these plays is increased perception of reality, not conversion to any specific set of beliefs.

By presenting his audience with a full look at the worst, Albee attempts to arouse twentieth-century American man to increased awareness about himself and his world, to force him out of his self-defensive illusion that his innocence is still intact and that he has not brutalized, exploited, and compromised both himself and other people, and to expose his subterfuges. Albee stated in an interview with Digby Diehl that one of his major concerns in his plays is with the accurate description of reality; and this presentation of an accurate "picture of our time" is meant to implicitly include the following admonition to his audience: "Do you like it? If you don't like it change it."[7] As Alan Schneider asserts, through his vivid depiction of the empty institutions, rituals, relationships, language, and lives of people in "this slipping land," Albee is dedicated to "shocking us with the truth of our present-day behavior and thought, striving to purge us into an actual confrontation with reality."[8]

Albee's plays do begin with the premise of the absurdity of present-day American society. Modern man is weak and deluded, with no will or nerve to oppose the loss of identity, compassion, and community which once supposedly existed. Clearly and persistently revealing his second thematic concern, Albee demonstrates throughout his plays that, indeed, modern man has arrived at his present isolated, alienated, unhappy state and perpetuates this state because he has rejected "an actual confrontation with reality"; man has failed to live authentically because of his attempt to escape his absolute freedom and responsibility, which are the facts of his existence since God "turned his back on the whole thing some time ago." (ZS, p.35) Just as Albee, on the social level, is not attempting to destroy the institutions of the family, marriage, friendship, organized religion, and so forth, but is instead attempting to improve man's manner of dealing with them, so on the philosophical level, he is not protesting, as Brustein claims, against the fact of man's existence in a problem-filled, unpredictable world; instead, throughout his plays he protests against man's dishonest, escapist responses to this world.

In an article entitled "Which Theatre is the Absurd One?" Albee unequivocally states his position regarding modern American man's unhappy state and man's own responsibility for the creation of that state. Albee explains that his work is part of the "absorption-in-art of certain existentialist and post-existentialist philosophical concepts having to do, in the main, with man's attempts to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense--which makes no sense because the moral, religious, political, and social structures man has erected to 'illusion' himself have collapsed."[9]

In this article and in all his plays, Albee demonstrates that he accepts the assumption, articulated by Grandma in The American Dream, that twentieth-century man does live "in the age of deformity" (AD, p.86), because the traditional beliefs and institutions that once gave dependable, recognizable form, order, and meaning to the world can no longer be accepted. Man, as several of Albee's characters assert, is "abandon-ed" (VW, p.185) in the post-existentialist world, and "there is a great . . . abandonment." (BS, p.70) In his abandoned state, man is left to respond to the relatively few, but ultimately significant, concerns that always remain to him: "life, death, isolation, and communication."[10] Man, in a senseless position in a senseless world, is, in Martin Esslin's words, confronted with "the basic choices, the basic situations of his existence," which should make him more aware than ever before of his "precarious and mysterious position in the universe."[11]

Given such a situation, some contemporary dramatists such as Eugene Ionesco in The Chairs and Samuel Beckett in Act Without Words, I conclude that man really has no choices and that he immediately and inevitably becomes as absurd as his senseless world: "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."[12] Man, along with his environment, is seen as absurd. Therefore, these playwrights create subhuman characters in a bleak, hopeless world in which "images of muck, mud, ashes, and fecal matter, in a state of decomposition and decay"[13] predominate. In Beckett's Waiting for Godot, for example, Lucky gives the following description of the state of man: "Man in brief in spite of the strides of alimentation and defecation wastes

and pines . . . ."[14] Communication and interaction among such characters is impossible, because isolation is inevitable and words are only empty vestiges. In this kind of play, objects begin to impinge on man, who has lost control of his external world; and man progressively becomes just another "object," somewhat less than human, because no absolute standards and no conception of "human nature" exist by which he can judge himself. Characters are inactive, becoming almost inert, because all of their possible actions are equally meaningless (or meaningful). Illusions and reality merge and become indistinguishable.

On the other hand, to Albee, the lack of absolutes in the world is not the source of man's absurdity. Man becomes absurd only when he makes demands upon himself and his environment that would be satisfiable only if there were a certain God and a perceptible meaning in life. And since there are no a priori values that predetermine a qualitative judgment of man's actions, no eschatological concern, and no divinely imposed social or moral order, man is completely free to determine his worth, his values, and the nature of his being by his own thought, words, and action, which is as terrifying--since man is now "without excuse"--as it is liberating. The reaction to one's awareness of himself as a totally free, totally responsible being frequently is negative. The desire to deny the weight of responsibility for oneself and others may be intense. Throughout his plays, however, Albee attacks man's inclination to abrogate responsibility which thereby makes man himself absurd; he does this through his vivid depiction of characters who have compounded their "senseless position in a world that makes no sense" by determining not to face, accept, and cope with

reality. These characters make themselves absurd by their attempts to evade reality in one or several of the following ways.

From The Zoo Story to All Over, Albee shows characters who attempt to escape reality in four main ways. First, characters attempt to abrogate through immersion in diversionary activities that dull one's perceptions. Second, they may try to live according to arbitrary systems created by external powers such as governments, churches, or social classes. Third, some characters become as completely withdrawn and passive as possible because of their fallacious belief that withdrawal is not a choice that will have any repercussions and that one can simply become totally passive and abdicate responsibility with impunity. And, finally, many characters attempt to substitute their dreams and illusions about life in the place of the actual facts about the reality of their lives. These characters cannot tolerate the bright light of reality; confrontation with the real world is too unpredictable and demanding, so they lay "claim to the cave" (DB, p.100) and retreat to a safe, abstracted level of life, where they encounter only the form and appearance of life but not the reality. The "enclosed worlds" of the sets, which are meant to suggest wombs and caves, pointedly emphasize the characters' retreats "back from the world" (DB, p.100) and into inauthenticity. Most of the characters in the plays choose to respond to life in the manner described by Claire in A Delicate Balance:

> We submerge our truths and have our sunsets on untroubled waters. [. . .] We live with our truths in the grassy bottom, and we examine aallllll the interpretations of aallllll the implications like we had a life for nothing else, for God's sake. (DB, pp. 100-101)

The characters exist removed from the active, confusing, and problematic world, or at least attempt to exist in that way. They are

willing to examine life only in a purely abstract, academic way, expending their time and concentration on the interpretations of implications, that is, on examining the translations or second-hand explanations of that which is merely suggested but not clearly stated, a process which, of course, keeps them far from contact with reality. Their use of language, as pointed out in the preceding chapter, also vividly illustrates this pervasive tendency. The characters are fascinated with the form of their words; they carefully examine and concentrate on the structure of their language but rarely are willing to examine the real content.

In each play, Albee shows the self-created and self-perpetuated absurdity that results from the characters' various forms of retreat from the facts of their present reality. Verbal games, sexual promiscuity, and especially liquor are some of the more frequently recurring forms of retreat into diversionary activities. It is implied that Martha with her "rubbing alcohol," Honey with her brandy, and Claire with her great variety all have chosen alcohol and intoxication as one of their methods of avoiding confrontation with the world. Nick and George discuss the similar situations of many characters in the plays:

> NICK: Everybody drinks a lot here in the East. (Thinks about it) Everybody drinks a lot in the Middle West, too.
>
> GEORGE: We drink a great deal in this country, and I suspect we'll be drinking a great deal more, too . . . if we survive. (VW, p.106)

By the conclusion of the play A Delicate Balance, not only Claire--whose perpetual drinking does not result from a biological weakness but is "merely willful" (DB, p.36)--but also, Harry, Tobias, and Julia have "taken to drinking in the morning." (DB, p.173)

To Agnes, however, the "repeated temporary stilling" resulting from artificial, chemically-induced relief is not sufficient, for she is "concerned with peace . . . not mere relief." (DB, p.20) She longs for the peace of those quite mad people who can "becom[e] a stranger in . . . the world, quite . . . uninvolved" (DB, p.13), just as George longs for their constant serenity:

> [. . .] one of the saddest things about men is the way they age . . . some of them. Do you know what it is with insane people? [. . .] They don't change . . . they don't grow old. [. . .] They maintain a . . . a firm-skinned serenity . . . the . . . the under-use of everything leaves them . . . quite whole. (VW, p.91)

The play A Delicate Balance is bounded by insanity. The play begins and ends with Agnes's speculations, with their "surprising lack of unpleasantness" (DB, p.13), about the possibility of choosing madness "if all else should fail, if sanity such as it is should become too much." (DB, p.20) Her words are an echo of Martha's words in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?:

> NICK: You're all crazy: nuts.
> MARTHA: (Affects a brogue) Awww, 'tis the refuge we take when the unreality of the world weighs too heavy on our tiny heads. Relax; sink into it; you're no better than anybody else. (VW, pp.187-188)

Martha's words suggest that insanity is the refuge of all those whose preconceptions about the nature of reality do not correspond with the facts of reality, of those who seek imposed order and meaning in "the age of deformity."

In Tiny Alice, Julian innocently admits that he chose to commit himself to an insane asylum for exactly that reason. He could not reconcile himself to the great chasm between his conception of the nature of God and "the use to which men put . . . God." (TA, p.43) Julian equates his sanity with his absolute religious faith;

therefore, when he doubts his faith, he also begins to doubt his sanity: "[. . .] I was confused . . . and intimidated . . . by the world about me, and let slip contact with it . . . with my faith [and, therefore, his sanity]." (TA, p.59) Again at the end of the play, when Julian discovers that his conception of what should be happening in reality does not coincide with the facts, he attempts to return to insanity with the same deliberate, conscious willfulness with which Claire chooses intoxication for her refuge:

> JULIAN: No, no, I will . . . I will go back! I will . . . go back to it. To . . . to . . . I will go back to the asylum. [. . .] To . . . my asylum. MY! ASYLUM! My . . . my refuge . . . in the world, from all the demons waking, my . . . REFUGE! (TA, pp.163-164)

In A Delicate Balance Julia and, to a lesser extent, Harry and Edna choose a form of retreat somewhat comparable to Julian's. They seek to return to the absolute lack of responsibility that is found in childhood, when "succor," "comfort," and "warmth" are provided by one's seemingly omnipotent parents. Throughout the play, the three combat for possession of "the room":

> A special room with a night light, or the door ajar so you can look down the hall from the bed and see that Mommy's door is open. (DB, p.99)

They want to return "home forever, back from the world," and find refuge in "the sadness and reassurance of [their] parents." (DB, p.100) Julia is characterized throughout the play by her reversion to childish behavior. She is described in the stage directions at one point as a "confused child" (DB, p.123); Tobias's description of her hysterical behavior sounds like the description of a child in a tantrum (DB, p.114); Claire calls her a "perpetual brat" (DB, p.154); and Tobias accusingly asserts that after each of her four disastrous

ventures into the world in her marriages--marriages which obviously have so little chance of success that one cannot avoid speculating along with Claire about the motives--she "expect[s] to come back here, [and] nestle in to being fifteen and misunderstood." (DB, p.70) Even at the age of thirty-six, she is still, as Edna describes her, a"willful, wicked, wretched girl." (DB, p.122)

In fact, nearly all the characters who seek to escape responsibility for themselves in the world might be accused of childish, immature responses to reality. Particularly in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, the four characters who have retreated from contact with reality appear thus to have arrested their emotional and moral development:

> In essence they are children. Honey is referred to in Dr. Seuess terms and curls up on the floor like a young child while George and Martha play sad games like "vicious children" with a "manic" manner.[15]

The language of the play, with its frequently recurring use of baby-talk, further reinforces this evaluation of the characters. In the same way, Peter in The Zoo Story is described in the stage directions as looking younger than normal for his age, possibly from "the under-use of everything," and Jerry, who is said to look older and more weary, points out Peter's sweetness and his "truly enviable innocence," which are like those of a child who has never encountered the senselessness and cruelty of the world. Julian, in Tiny Alice, is quite comparable to Peter. He enters the castle of Miss Alice possessed of the same kind of innocence which has resulted from his comparable withdrawal from life. He is the one character in the play who has not been initiated into the mysteries of the truth of Tiny Alice, and the other characters talk to him as if he were a child. Miss Alice repeatedly refers to him as "my little Julian" (TA, p.120) and, as he lies dying, remarks,

"How like a little boy you are." (TA, p.168) The Lawyer derisively terms Julian a "poor priestlet" (TA, p.139); the Butler compares Julian's situation to that of a little boy who has accidentally become locked in a dark closet (TA, pp.126, 133); and, in the middle of Julian's final, long monologue, he calls in the voice of a little boy for "my cookie" (TA, p.181), that is, for his reassurance and reward from the distant, cold God whom he has insisted upon.

Just as the characters seek to evade "an actual confrontation with reality" through various forms of temporary or more permanent "madness"--including Julian's hallucinations, Agnes's obsession with schizophrenia, many of the characters' regressions into childish behavior, and the general intoxication--so they also attempt evasion through another kind of diversionary action, through "derision and [. . .] laughter . . . God, the laughter." (VW, p.227) Throughout the plays, there is much laughter by the characters, which is usually evasive or derisive, never joyous and spontaneous. For example, Peter laughs evasively, "by reflex" (ZS, p.12); he laughs nervously when questioned by Jerry about the amount of money he makes: "Well, I make around eighteen thousand a year, but I don't carry more than forty dollars at any one time . . . in case you're a . . . holdup man . . . Ha, ha, ha." (ZS, p.19) He laughs hysterically when tickled by Jerry, and he chuckles at his own feeble attempts at jokes, but in every case the laughter results from his attempt to avoid reacting honestly and straightforwardly to Jerry.

The Nurse in The Death of Bessie Smith is described as having a "wild laugh" (BS, p.24), which is part of the hard, derisive facade that she has erected to evade her confrontation with reality. She does not react honestly in her interactions with the Intern and the Orderly;

she giggles at the sexual repartee between herself and the Intern rather than admit that she longs for a relationship that goes beyond the physical level. She "laughs wildly" when she has won superiority over the Intern in their verbal battles rather than admit that she, like Martha, Agnes, and the Wife in All Over, would prefer a role other than that of the "destructive woman." She is described as reacting with "a great laugh, but mirthless" (BS, p.69), as she realizes that her concern with the economic realities, verbal games, and the maintenance of her pretensions has effected her total alienation from the Intern. Her laughter finally "mounts to hysteria" and "is almost crying" (BS, p.80) as the play ends with her cruel and derisive words--words and laughter which are a futile attempt to cover her very real pain, sorrow, and need. Martha's loud, raucous laugh resembles that of the Nurse, both in its form and frequency and in its intent, just as Honey's perpetual giggle resembles the defensive, reflexive laughter of characters such as Peter and Tobias, and as George's self-ironic laugh resembles that of Claire, the Long-Winded Lady, and most of the characters in the play All Over.

The laughter among the characters increases in Albee's most recent play, All Over, but it has become completely joyless. All the characters in the play have consciously retreated from confrontation with reality, and their "cold, knowing, helpless laughter" (AO, p.22), their "quiet, terrible laughter" (AO, p.22), their sad laughter, and their "quiet, choked laughter" (AO, p.25) are part of their admissions of unhappiness with their dishonest, inauthentic lives. In this play, all the characters, except the Daughter, are simultaneously overcome by hysterical laughter, "self-generating laughter . . . produced by extreme tension, fatigue, ultimate sadness and existential awareness" (AO, p.48); but

the laughter is the only result of this shared moment of relief and awareness. No character acts in any other way to take responsibility for his own life or to help the other lonely characters in compassionate love. The characters in All Over frequently laugh, as do the characters in most of Albee's other plays, but their laughter does not result from following Martin Esslin's admonition in The Theatre of the Absurd "to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions--and to laugh at it.[16] Instead, they use their derisive, evasive, or self-ironic laughter as merely another dishonest way of responding to situations in which they should react compassionately and openly. They learn too late that their laughter, like their liquor and their regressions, is bought at too great an emotional and moral expense.

Nonetheless, these frantic diversionary activities do furnish escape routes from reality for some of Albee's characters. However, an easier route, which is far more socially acceptable and requires no explanations or justification, is found by other characters in their total acceptance of an arbitrary system which includes a predetermined set of beliefs and a format for behavior. In this way, the individuals feel that they are relieved of the responsibility of creating meaning in their own lives through their own thought and actions. For example, several characters in Albee's plays attempt to use absolute conformity to the beliefs, assumptions, standards, and behavior of middle-class life as their refuge. Thus, they can become caught up in the concerns of a materialistic society, and their lives will become so fast-paced and complicated that they can hide from their confrontation with reality in the demanding daily routine of their lives.

Among these characters are Peter, Mommy, Daddy, Mrs. Barker, Nick, and Honey; they dress, speak, act, and think in accordance with middle-class propriety. For example, Peter in The Zoo Story fulfills the meaning of his name and becomes "the rock on which institutions stand."[17] Middle-aged, middle-sized, either "upper-middle-middle-class" or "lower-upper-middle-class" (ZS, p.20), in the middle in appearance between handsome and homely (ZS, p.11), and only moderately articulate, Peter is satisfied with the middle range of experiences and sensations, providing little pain but also little joy, which allows him his "solitary free passage" (ZS, p.35) through life. He has acquired all the external trappings of a successful middle-class man: an executive position in a small business, a wife and two children, a fashionable apartment, two television sets, the requisite number of household pets, and, undoubtedly, the moderately liberal social and political opinions espoused by the periodical that he reads, Time Magazine. His total conformity to the middle-class system also provides him with absolute, arbitrary standards on which he can base his life. From his point of view, Good and Evil are clearly distinguishable; the system provides him with knowledge of what should and should not exist. He exclaims that Jerry's lustful, drunken landlady is "unthinkable," agrees that people and situations such as Jerry describes in his life are only "for reading about," and admits his belief that "fact is better left to fiction" (ZS, pp.28-29) when it does not correlate with the preconceptions and arbitrary standards of one's system of belief. Peter's codes also indicate that it is not proper for a stranger to initiate a conversation in Central Park in New York City in the mid-twentieth century, but Jerry, who does not accept any part of Peter's

system, bursts into Peter's quiet, well-organized, predictable life and, if only temporarily, disrupts the routine. Peter makes appeals to society's customs, tacit rules, laws, and labels in his attempt to counter Jerry's disruption. However, he is eventually "dispossessed" (ZS, p.49) of the bench that represents his abdication to conformity and personal non-involvement in creating meaning in his life, a stance which has made him become as absurd as the world around him:

> JERRY: You have everything and now you want this bench. Are these the things men fight for? Tell me, Peter, is this bench, this iron and wood, is this your honor? Is this the thing in the world you'd fight for? Can you think of anything more absurd? (ZS, p.44)

Agnes and Tobias and Edna and Harry in A Delicate Balance live comparably absurd lives because of their escape into the routine of a "system" which includes their nights at the club, golf, trips to the city, needlepoint panels, French lessons, and what Agnes describes as "our various whatever-they-may-be's." (DB, p.81) There are no mountains and no chasms in their "regulated great gray lives" (DB, p.78) which dwindle before them. In fact, Agnes is completely absorbed in maintaining the arbitrary "shape" of the family, which is held together only by custom and tradition: "blood binds us" (DB, p.156). Her absorption in the detailed procedures involved in that maintenance enables her to remain relatively undisturbed even when radical disruption of the routine occurs in the form of Harry and Edna's unexpected visit. While Tobias anguishes, "Agnes, talky Agnes, ruler of the roost, and maître d' and licensed wife-- [is] silent. All cozy, coffee, thinking of the menu for the week, planning." (DB, p.155) She is able to evade confronting what she is and what the reality of the world around her is by submerging herself in meeting the requirements

of the American stereotype of the totally proper, middle-class wife: "a mother; a lover; a homemaker; a nurse; a hostess; an agitator, a pacifier, a truth-teller, a deceiver . . ." (DB, p.65). She loses herself in her role, which is automatically determined for her when she chooses to accept conventional middle-class standards as her "system":

> There are many things a woman does: she bears the children [. . .] . She runs the house, for what that's worth: makes sure there's food, and not just anything, and decent linen; looks well; assumes whatever duties are demanded--if she is in love, or loves; and plans. [. . .] The reins we hold! It's a team of twenty horses, and we sit there, and we watch the road and check the leather . . . if our . . . man is so disposed. But there are things we do not do. [. . .] We don't decide the route. (DB, pp.136-137)

And when Harry and Edna decide to return to their own home and their own regulated, well-maintained lives and to ignore the "nothing" (DB, p.55) that temporarily disrupted their routines, Agnes immediately begins to attempt to discuss the mundane and to draw her disordered family back into shape:

> AGNES: (To fill a silence) What I find most astonishing--aside from my belief that I will, one day . . . lose my mind [. . .] what I find most astonishing, I think, is the wonder of daylight, of the sun. [. . .] And when the daylight comes again . . . comes order with it. (Sad chuckle) Poor Edna and Harry. (Sigh) Well, they're safely gone . . . and we'll all forget . . . quite soon. (Pause) Come now; we can begin the day. (DB, p.175)

This is the return to daylight that Tobias, with his new insight and at least temporary awareness, had justifiably feared, because "when the daylight comes the pressures will be on and all the insight won't be worth a damn." (DB, p.134)

Other characters throughout the plays seek to hide in diverse systems of thought and behavior. The Nurse in The Death of Bessie Smith

attempts to evade her confrontation with reality through adherence to the routine behavior demanded in an institution that is based on the bureaucratic system. Throughout the play, she never moves from her seat behind the admissions desk, and she berates the Second Nurse for deviating from the impersonal requirements of the system: "Mercy Hospital! Mercy, indeed, you away from your desk all the time. Some hospitals are run better than others; some nurses stay at their posts." (BS, p.48) For the same reason, she hides behind concern for the laws of the bureaucratic society when Jack comes to the hospital to ask for help following his automobile wreck: "You give me your name! You can't take off from an accident like that . . . I'll phone the police; I'll tell them where you are!" (BS, p.77) The Old Woman in Box-Mao-Box recites the words of a poem in which the persona is submerged in an arbitrary system of stereotyped behavior which shields her from having to cope with her own feelings that result from her mistreatment by her children. Chairman Mao, in that same play, attempts his evasion through absolute submersion in the dogma of a political system that requires the complete surrender of a person's body and mind: The Chinese Communist Party, which "is at once a complete system of proletarian ideology and a new rational system in human history." (Box, p.44) Because of his acceptance of the system as the organizing principle for all aspects of his life, his words and actions--as well as his thoughts--are predetermined for him. Nothing in the world around him can disrupt his life, and he is freed of the obligation of reacting personally and honestly to other people; as the stage directions explain, "he is aware of the other characters, but he must never look at them or suggest in any way that anything they say is affecting his words." (Box, p.33)

Similarly, Julian in the play Tiny Alice has attempted evasion through absolute adherence to the dogma of a particular system, although it differs from that of Mao by being a religious system. Julian sees the world as a frightening, unpredictable place; for him, it resembles a remote attic closet where cries for help are pointless and where nobody is "likely to come . . . for a very long time." (TA, p.126) Julian appears to have accepted the belief that, to avoid despair and insanity, one must believe that somebody (God) will eventually come to unlock the door and offer consolation and compensation (in an afterlife). Julian's conception of the world and his response to the world began developing while he was still a child and had fallen, injuring himself very badly. As he lay bleeding, he changed his unheeded cries for help from calls for his grandfather to calls to God, "whose non-appearance is accountable, and who is the personification of the need to be helped."[18] Julian, in his pain and fear, cries out:

> Grandfather? (Cry of pain, then) Oh . . . GOD! "I come to thee in agony." (Cry to the void) HELP . . . ME! (Pause) No help. (TA, p.180)

As C. W. E. Bigsby explains in the book Confrontation and Commitment, Tiny Alice constitutes Albee's rejection of any religious system as a substitute for confrontation:

> . . . he sees belief in an abstraction as merely an excuse for the surrender of responsibility and identity. Its origin lies not in spiritual conviction but in fear; fear of an empty universe in which man must create his own meaning and his own relationships. Where George and Martha had created an imaginary son in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, the protagonist of Tiny Alice creates what Albee would consider an imaginary son of God. Both inventions are an expression of fear of present reality.[19]

However, Julian's creation is potentially more destructive because, comparable to Mao in his absolute belief in the correctness and superiority

of Communism, Julian believes in the absolute rightness and righteousness of his system. He thinks that he alone knows the truth of the nature of God as a distant, unreachable abstraction, and he insists that other people's conceptions of God are perversions of his truth: "I could not reconcile myself to the chasm between the nature of God and the use to which men put . . . God. [. . .] Men create a false God in their own image, it is easier for them!" (TA, pp.43,44) When Miss Alice, the Lawyer, and the Butler disturb his assurance in their various ways, he finally is forced into a re-examination of the structure of his system of belief, although he continues his evasion of the confrontation with reality almost to the very end of his life. The multi-leveled mysteries on stage parallel the mystery of what lies beyond the stage. Governing every level of the mysteries is the concept that absolute surety is hidden from human perception and comprehension. Man simply will never know anything about God absolutely. And therein lies the compounding of Julian's self-created absurdity: first, in demanding absolute knowledge of God, and, second, in believing that he has found it in his system of belief.

Through his depiction of Julian in Tiny Alice, Albee presents blind faith in a religious system, with its emphasis on a compensatory afterlife which unavoidably results in a de-emphasis on facing and coping with the senseless and empty real world, as one of man's inauthentic responses to life through capitulation to an external system. Unquestioning faith in history, in scientific progress, or in the myth of the "American Dream" constitute similar capitulations. George asserts in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? that "when people can't abide things as they are, when they can't abide the present, they

do one of two things [. . .] either they turn to a contemplation of the past, as I have done, or they set about to . . . alter the future." (VW, p.178) George retreats into his history books; he contemplates the patterns of history and reinforces his already pervasive cynicism as he reads from Spengler:

> And the west, encumbered by crippling alliances, and burdened with a morality too rigid to accomodate itself to the swing of events, must . . . eventually . . . fall. (VW, p.174)

On the other hand, the biologist Nick represents "the pragmatic accommodation" of the "wave-of-the-future boys." (VW, p.107) The necessity for man's confrontation with his senseless position in a world which makes no sense would be eliminated in the future by the work of these scientists, because chromosome alteration will create "a race of men . . . test-tube-bred . . . incubator-born . . . superb and sublime. [. . .] a race of scientists and mathematicians, each dedicated to and working for the greater glory of the super-civilization." (VW, pp.65,66) Man's problem with facing his absolute freedom and responsibility no longer will be a consideration because the diversity, unpredictability, and suprise that characterize the senseless world will give way, in a scientifically controlled environment, to a rigidly regulated, artificially imposed and maintained "order and constancy." (VW, p.67)

Both these forms of retreat, into the contemplation of past glory or into the belief in infinite progress, may be aspects of the retreat into the "American Dream," which constitutes a system or pattern to which many people, epitomized by Mommy, Daddy, Mrs. Barker, and the Young Man, try to conform. In the article "Myth and the American Dream: O'Neill to Albee," Jordan Y. Miller explains part of the myth of the American Dream:

> Given youth--that is, youngness of spirit and body, unsophisticated enthusiasm, limitless visions of majestic goals reached through unencumbered individual initiative--all things are possible.[20]

The myth, which has been evolving in the United State since the frontier period, indicates that the present is important only as a step towards achievement of some tangible goal in the future, and the most frequent of these goals are wealth, power, and prestige. The Dream implies that achievement of these goals is equally possible for all human beings. Limitless possibilities and attainable perfection define the position of man in a world where "everything is peachy-keen," according to the American Dream. In this system, all things are evaluated by pragmatic, utilitarian, and material standards; however, as shown in the play The American Dream, the system has become distorted and the utilitarian standards have come to be applied to people as well as to objects and activities. Thus, Mommy and Daddy feel no compunction about ridding themselves of Grandma when she becomes too old to "earn her keep" (AD, p.67), just as they felt none at ridding themselves of their first "bumble" when it proved not to meet society's arbitrary standards for the perfect male. Daddy's ambition for power and position also shows one of the perversions of the attributes of the Dream, because he merely states his ambition but takes no action to fulfill his desires:

> MOMMY: All his life, Daddy has wanted to be a United States Senator; but now . . . why now he's changed his mind, and for the rest of his life he's going to want to be Governor . . . it would be nearer the apartment, you know. (AD, p.83)

When the Dream is thus distorted, it is not surprising that marriage becomes a business transaction in which prosperity and position are bought with sexuality or that the Young Man who will "do anything for money"

(AD, p.109) is readily accepted as furnishing complete satisfaction as the scion of Mommy and Daddy's family. Only Grandma, a holdover from the old pioneer stock, is concerned with speculating about what the American Dream, under other circumstances, "might have turned out to be." (AD, p.115) However, the distortion has proceeded unchecked for too long. Now, happiness is equated with wealth, and satisfaction is equated with the fulfillment of empty social standards and codes. The American Dream has become a nightmare, and those who live according to the Dream have themselves become absurd.

As Albee's plays demonstrate, modern American man has become absurd through his refusal to face, accept, and attempt to cope with the facts of the situation -- albeit painful -- that comprises his personal "reality." He has accepted the arbitrary social, political, and economic systems -- which comprise the American Dream -- as a substitute for personal responsibility. Americans have, according to Daniel J. Boorstein in The Image: Or What Happened to the American Dream, "used our wealth, our literacy, our technology, and our progress, to create the thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life."[21] However, in his play The American Dream, Albee goes beyond an attack on the mutilation of the Dream, beyond an "attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society" (AD, p.54), to a broader examination of the "fatal, soul-destroying consequences of unquestioned generalized acceptance of and participation in the principles of a potentially destructive national myth."[22] The play is more generally concerned with revealing the human inadequacy of the American Dream of the value of material success.

Characters such as Peter, Tobias, the Long-Winded Lady in Box-Mao-Box, and all the characters in All Over appear to have accepted the

Dream or some comparable system of belief and behavior, but they also find refuge from reality in another way. All simply, and as completely as possible, withdraw from real physical and emotional involvement in life, believing that total passivity and the refusal to acknowledge the problems existing all around them does not constitute a choice of action for which they can be held responsible. Peter leaves his family on his only day off from work and withdraws to his secluded park bench: "there's never anyone sitting here, so I have it all to myself." (ZS, p.41) The Long-Winded Lady has withdrawn so completely from emotional involvement in life that she has left herself nothing worth living, or dying, for. Similarly, the characters in the play All Over have spent their lives "getting set against everything, fobbing it all off" (AO, p.83), and all seem to have accepted the dictum of the Mistress that "if the choice comes down to masochism [that is, forcing oneself into the inevitably painful confrontation with reality] or cowardice [that is, actual retreat into one of the more apparent refuges such as intoxication or insanity], then maybe best do nothing." (AO, p.100)

However, the one character who most obviously attempts to use passivity in order to evade reality is Tobias in A Delicate Balance. Agnes gives a succinct evaluation of Tobias's usual response to problematic situations, through withdrawal, early in the play:

> AGNES: (Semi-serious razzing) Things get hot, move off, huh? Yes? (DB, p.16)

The correctness of her evaluation becomes progressively more apparent throughout the play. For example, when Tobias is asked by Claire to take a position regarding her place in the family, he acts as if he does not hear her plea:

CLAIRE: If we are to live here, on Tobias' charity, then we are subject to the will of his wife. If we were asked, at our father's dying . . .
AGNES: (Final) Those are the ground rules.
CLAIRE: (A sad smile) Tobias? (Pause) Nothing? (Pause) Are those the ground rules? Nothing? Too . . . settled? Too . . . dried up? Gone? (Nicely) All right. (Back to AGNES) Very well, then, Agnes, you win. (DB, pp.38-39)

As Claire's words indicate, Tobias's passivity and refusal to make a choice, indeed, do constitute a kind of choice which directly influences the lives of other people. His refusal to act has affected the life of his much-divorced daughter Julia:

AGNES: Each time that Julia comes, each clockwork time . . . do you send her back? Do you tell her, "Julia, go home to your husband, try it again"? Do you? No, you let it . . . slip. It's your decision, sir.[. . .] You could have pushed her back . . . if you'd wanted to. (DB, p.142)

Even when directly appealed to by both Claire and Julia, who do want to escape their regulated lives which are dwindling before them but who lack the personal strength to make the move, Tobias evades. Claire asks him to help them discover a way of life that "is always good and happy":

JULIA: Would you, Dad?
TOBIAS: (Looks up, sees them both looking at him, frowns more) It's . . . it's too late, or something. (DB, p.78)

However, the arrival of Harry and Edna disrupts Tobias's withdrawal into passivity and inaction. He attempts to use his usual ploy and does not respond to Agnes's direct question concerning Harry and Edna, which is repeated four times: "What did you decide?" (DB, pp.133,134, 136). Agnes finally forces Tobias to see that he is responsible for much of the shape that their lives have assumed, because she makes him see that his indecision and non-involvement do constitute a stand. She forces him to admit the falsity of his belief that she is the one

"who make[s] all the decisions, really rule[s] the game" (DB, p.141); she has only taken over following his decision, or non-decision, and made it work:

> AGNES: Whatever you decide . . . I'll make it work; I'll run it for you so you'll never know there's been a change in anything. (DB, p.138)

She forces him to recognize his paradoxical stance of decisive withdrawal, which began after their first forced confrontation with reality that was brought about by the death of their son and which is most poignantly epitomized in Tobias's choice of literal, physical withdrawal, coitus interuptus:

> ANGES: When Teddy died? We could have had another son; we could have tried. But no [. . .] I think it was a year, when you spilled yourself on my belly, sir? "Please? Please, Tobias?" No, you wouldn't even say it out: I don't want another child, another loss. "Please? Please, Tobias?" And guiding you, trying to hold you in?
>
> . . . . . .
>
> (Quietly; sadly) Well, it was your decision, was it not?
>
> TOBIAS: Yes.
>
> AGNES: And I have made the best of it. Have lived with it. Have I not?
>
> TOBIAS: (Pause; a plea) What are we going to do? About everything?
>
> AGNES: (Quietly; sadly; cruelly) Whatever you like. Naturally. (DB, pp.143,144-145)

By making Tobias examine and admit the facts of his reality, Agnes totally explodes Tobias's "illusion" (DB, p.144) about the impunity with which he can abdicate responsibility for himself and other people.

Tobias is not alone in his attempt to escape into compensatory, evasive, or straightforwardly dishonest dreams and illusions. In all Albee's plays, absorption in dreams and illusions repeatedly occurs as a way in which characters seek to avoid confrontation with the truth. In each instance, a character creates his illusions because the reality

of his present situation is too oppresive; however, in each instance, the character's choice of escape into his illusions results, eventually, in even greater pain and more complexities in his life and causes the individual himself to become "absurd."

In The Death of Bessie Smith, for example, the characters have retreated into dreams of the past and the future and of faraway places--times and places which they believe to be less painful than their present reality and which they think will impose order and meaning on their lives. The Nurse and her father retreat into their dreams of the position and prosperity that belonged to their family long before the present time, in which "the acres have diminished and the paint is flaking [. . .] and there is a great . . . abandonment." (BS, p.70) In the same way, because their lives presently consist of broken promises and frustrated hopes, Jack and the Negro Orderly dream of getting "what's been promised. . . . Nothing more. Just that" (BS, p.42) and of the North, of "New York City, where nobody's any better than anybody else." (BS, p.47) Both Negro men live with the dream of fulfilling the American Dream of material success. Similarly, because he is dissatisfied with his present situation, because of his "dislike of waste . . . stagnation," and because of his feeling of being "stranded" in "the emergency ward of this second-rate hospital in this second-rate state" (BS, p.59), the Intern is obsessed by dreams of active, heroic participation in the Spanish Civil War.

In Tiny Alice, Julian is equally as obsessed by his dream of sacrifice, even martyrdom, in a death which he thinks will give some significance to his otherwise meaningless life by assuring his significance in the afterlife: "Oh, martyrdom. To be that. To be

able . . . to be that. [. . .] The . . . death of the saints . . . was always the beginning of their lives. To go bloodstained and worthy . . . upward." (TA, p.121) In his concern with living as if his illusion were true, he comes to resemble the phrenological head that faces him on the table as he dies. Julian has spent his life staring straight ahead, looking to the future, seeing nothing of the here and now, and thus living as if contact with other human beings and the creation of a full, happy life were unimportant. Almost to the end of the play, Julian insists on maintaining his illusion:

> I have not worn [clerical robes] and given up for . . . for mockery; I have not stretched out the path of my life before me, to walk on straight [. . .] I have not fought the nightmares--and the waking demons, yes--and the years of despair, those, too . . . I have not accepted half [of life, through enclosure, celibacy, and deprivation], for nothing. (TA, p.160)

However, his excessive protestation only further emphasizes the real absurdity of his position.

The characters in The American Dream live in the most obvious absurdity, which directly results from their acceptance of an empty dream--symbolized by their acceptance of the emotionally, physically, and morally empty American Dream boy. The dream of harmony, equality, and opportunity is no longer an ideal to be actively striven for by Mommy and Daddy, but it has become an image that is projected as if it were already attained. They are living in the dream instead of working toward its fulfillment; hence, their personal senselessness comes to match that of their senseless world.

The most obvious example in Albee's plays of the strength and destructiveness of compensatory illusions is, of course, that in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. George and Martha have created the fantasy

of a beautiful, blond, blue-eyed son in order to make their sterile, loveless reality bearable. In the fantasy son, they have an object/person to whom they can give the love that they deny to each other; as well, the illusion serves, in Martha's words, to "hold us off a bit, for mutual protection, to protect us all from George's weakness . . . any my . . . necessary greater strength . . . to protect himself . . . and us." (VW, pp.221-222) But George and Martha's creation of the illusion also serves to hold them off from confronting, accepting, and coping with their impotent reality. They have spent the twenty-one years since the creation of their fantasy son--which "was an easy birth . . . once it had been . . . accepted, relaxed into" (VW, p.219)--compounding their fantasy, which has come to the point that Martha, according to George, has finally "moved bag and baggage into [her] own fantasy world and now [she's] started playing variations on [her] own distortions." (VW, p.155) George, as well, appears to have become unable to distinguish fact from fantasy, or at least unwilling to make the distinction until compelled by extreme circumstances. Martha asks, "Truth or illusion, George. Doesn't it matter to you . . . at all?" (VW, p.204)

George and Martha determined early in their lives and marriage to evade reality, and that decision--epitomized in their creation of "sonny-Jim" but also clearly pointed up in their reliance on liquor, verbal games, Martha's promiscuity, and George's retreat into history books--has led to their present state of pervasive unhappiness in which love and hate, need and rejection, along with illusion and reality, are so combined and interdependent that honest reactions are nearly impossible. Martha's admission to Nick vividly demonstrates the painful entanglements and absurdity that develop in people's lives following

their initial capitulation to fear, their decision to compensate by dreams and illusions instead of reality, and their resulting decline into inauthenticity:

> MARTHA: There is only one man in my life who has ever . . . made me happy. [. . .] George who is out somewhere there in the dark . . . George who is good to me, and whom I revile; who understands me, and whom I push off; who can make me laugh and I choke it back in my throat; who can hold me, at night, so that it's warm, and whom I will bite so there's blood; who keeps learning the games we play as quickly as I can change the rules; who can make me happy and I do not wish to be happy, and yes I do wish to be happy. [. . .] whom I will not forgive for having come to rest; for having seen me and having said: yes; this will do; who has made the hideous, the hurting, the insulting mistake of loving me and must be punished for it. George and Martha: sad, sad, sad. (VW, pp.189,190-191)

George and Martha have fallen into the trap of self-created and self-perpetuated misery and senselessness in which many of Albee's other characters have been caught, in which the release of human love and contact is negated by the characters' refusal to forego illusions, passivity, adherence to external systems, and all their other refuges. What results from their refusal is a vicious, almost inescapable cycle of misery, evasion, further misery, and even further evasion. Peter, in The Zoo Story, becomes progressively more entrapped in this way as he attempts to keep possession of his "bench." He is caught in the vicious circle that eventually brings him increased misery as he is forced into participation in a suicide/murder. The Nurse in The Death of Bessie Smith also is comparably self-entrapped. Although she berates the other characters for their pretensions and illusions, she is the one who is least able to face the world and other people bereft of her myriad layers of defenses and dreams; she also is the one whose self-entrapment causes her to miss the chances for love and meaningful, committed action that arise in the play.

Comparably, in The American Dream, Mommy and Daddy are almost inextricably entangled in their self-created and self-perpetuated absurdity. They finally have become unable, or at least very unwilling, to distinguish between appearance and reality, between the appearance of satisfaction and real satisfaction. This fact is best illustrated in Mommy's narration of the story of the hat that she bought, a narrative which combines a discussion and depiction of the meaninglessness of words with an examination of the interchangeability of illusions and reality. Mommy gets satisfaction because the truth does not matter to her. Her satisfaction with the fallacious exchange of hats is based not on reality but on her choice of reactions, since she chooses to believe, in the face of the facts, that she got what she wanted:

> DADDY: (Clearing his throat) I would imagine that [the second hat] was the same hat they tried to sell you before.
> MOMMY: (With a little laugh) Well, of course it was!
> DADDY: That's the way things are today; you just can't get satisfaction; you just try.
> MOMMY: Well, I got satisfaction. (AD, p.61)

Her satisfaction with the hat, like her satisfaction with the new bumble of joy, is empty, unrelated to reality, and dependent on the manipulation of other people and the conscious choice to ignore things that one does not want to see. And as this example illustrates, as one repeatedly chooses to accept illusions instead of reality, it becomes progressively more difficult for one to distinguish between the two:

> MARTHA: Truth and illusion, George; you don't know the difference.
> GEORGE: No, but we must carry on as though we did.
> MARTHA: Amen. (VW, p.202)

In his analysis of Julian's reaction, the Lawyer in Tiny Alice correctly explains the conscious self-deception and distortion of the

facts of reality that is engaged in by self-entrapped characters such as Julian, Mommy and Daddy, George and Martha, the Nurse, and Peter:

> He'll take what he gets for . . . what he wishes it to be. AH, it is what I have always wanted, he'll say, looking terror and betrayal straight in the eye. Why not: face the inevitable and call it what you have always wanted. How to come out on top, going under. (TA, p.142)

All these characters' evasions, entrapments and increased unhappiness are willful and are based on their erroneous belief that retreat from reality is the least painful and least demanding course. For example, the Wife in All Over insists that retreat is necessary:

> You make a lot of adjustments over the years, if only to avoid being eaten away. Anger, resentment, loss, self-pity--and self-loathing--loneliness. You can't live with all that in the consciousness very long, so you put it under, or it gets well, and you're never sure which. (AO, p.102)

And the words of the Long-Winded Lady in Box-Mao-Box make this position even more explicit:

> One . . . concludes things--and if those things and what is really there don't . . . are not the same . . . well! . . . it would usually be better if it were so. The mind does that: it helps. (Box, p.55)

However, throughout his plays, Albee clearly shows that the abrogation of responsibility for oneself and others and the retreat into any kind of dishonest refuge only makes oneself absurd and compounds one's pain. The plays imply that man must reject these forms of escape and confront reality, that man must indeed try "to make sense for himself" and create meaning for himself. Albee does clearly acknowledge the world's absurdity, but he never succumbs to advocation of quietism and withdrawal as appropriate responses. He implies that man can change the present bad situation and eliminate his own absurdity in the world because man alone, through his false and inadequate responses to reality, is

responsible for its creation in the first place. Indeed, one must concur with Henry Knepler's assertion in the article "Edward Albee: Conflict of Traditions":

> Albee fights that senselessness [of man's position in the world] with all the brilliance of his characterization, his dialogue and his symbols, while at the same time using the modes and theatrical elements of the Absurd. . . . He uses the themes of the Absurd to portray the human condition: isolation; repetition; illusion. But he uses them in the American manner: isolation is very conscious and involuntary; repetition is guiltily self-imposed and recognized; and illusion is hallucinatory, mad, i.e., a clinical matter.[23]

Or, as C. W. E. Bigsby more succinctly states it: "To avoid reality, then, is to invite disaster. The boy in George's story who swerves to avoid a porcupine succeeds only in crashing into a tree."[24]

The audience member cannot avoid the awareness that swerving to avoid a head-on confrontation with prickly truth results, in each of Albee's plays, only in increased pain and problems for the characters, and this awareness leads one to awareness of Albee's third and most important thematic concern: an advocacy of the necessity of man's confrontation with and acceptance of reality. Thus, throughout the plays the characters are given opportunities to abandon their dishonest, dehumanizing stances, to disavow their lives lived in Bad Faith, and to act with honesty, which would thereby counteract their self-created absurdity and restore their dignity as human beings. In each play, that opportunity is provided by some person, event, or situation which unexpectedly but profoundly disrupts the characters' regulated lives and upsets the tenuously maintained balance of illusion and reality that allows their evasions of reality. The disruption forces them into at least a brief awareness of the facts of reality, and

they thus have an opportunity to re-evaluate their present stances. The characters are forced to see beyond the options of conformity, withdrawal, and compensatory illusions as ways of reacting to life; the violent disruption of the status quo forces them into an awareness of another possible choice: personal honesty, leading to action and commitment.

However similar the effect, the specific form of the disruptive force varies in each play. For example, in The Zoo Story the character Jerry functions as that force as he enters Peter's life with the shout, "MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!" (ZS, p.12), and begins the process--via the "teaching emotion," which combines both kindness and cruelty--of radically disturbing Peter's orderly existence. Jerry represents essential man, stripped of all props that ostensibly give stability and meaning to human life. Like Lear, the prototype of "unaccommodated man," Jerry has been forced to confront life at its extreme limits and to learn the same lesson of the absolute necessity, albeit difficulty, of sincere, compassionate, all-encompassing love. Lear learns his lesson through his interaction with a fool, a seeming madman, and through his own temporary insanity. Jerry learns his lesson equally as strangely, through his interaction with a diseased, misused, malnourished, old black dog in the entrance hall of his rooming house. This interaction forces him to perceive the lack of contact among human beings, to perceive the ambiguous nature of human love, and to discover how frequently people misunderstand and misinterpret the desperate reaching-out of others which may take many indirect forms, of which the dog's apparently hostile attacks is one example. In his new state of awareness, Jerry poses the question to Peter: "And,

perhaps, was the dog's attempt to bite me not an act of love? If we can so misunderstand, well, then, why have we invented the word love in the first place?" (ZS, p.36) In his interaction with Peter, Jerry fills the role played by the dog in the earlier interaction, and his "kindness" in asking Peter questions and in his narration of the parable "The Story of Jerry and the Dog" is comparable to the dog's initial attacks on him in the hallway. Brief, superficial contact is first made when Jerry tickles Peter, creating an intense, pleasure/pain (kindness/cruelty) sensation. For a short period of time, Peter unconsciously implies his awareness of his place in the "zoo" and of the emptiness of his props: "Well, I had my own zoo there for a moment with . . . hee, hee, the parakeets getting dinner ready, and the . . . ha, ha, whatever it was." (ZS, p.39)

Peter's first awareness is only momentary, however, so Jerry must move on to "cruelty," bitterly relating the facts about the world as a zoo where all people are separated by social and emotional bars, where the stench and the hawkers of wares abound, where "all the seals are barking" and "all the birds are screaming," and where it always is "feeding time" for some of the carnivores. (ZS, p.40) This painful narrative is interspersed with Jerry's progressively more forceful demands for Peter to relinquish his bench and progressively more violent physical attacks. But Peter persists in claiming his right to the bench, so Jerry is forced to take cruelty to its unavoidable conclusion. To Peter, who is in his own words "a responsible person" and "a GROWNUP" (ZS, p.45), Jerry issues the ultimate challenge: "Fight for it then. Defend yourself; defend your bench." (ZS, p.45)

In the same way, the dog had challenged Jerry to defend his own "solitary free passage." Man and dog had done battle, and a stalemate resulted. They reached a compromise; they neither love nor hurt, and each remains, alone. In his interaction with Peter, Jerry is determined to allow no such sad compromise. He believes, as his actions demonstrate, that any kind of contact and any increased awareness is better than continuing isolation. But Peter, with the knife held far in front of him in an unequivocably defensive stance, desperately tries to remain untouched, to keep out awareness: "I'll give you one last chance; get out of here and leave me alone!" (ZS, p.47) Jerry has pushed the disruption and interaction nearly to its limits; and if this second attempt at contact is not to end in futility like the first one, Jerry has only one possible response. His suicide/murder is voluntary but inescapable. If this is the only way in which Peter can be forced into a confrontation with reality, then "So be it!" (ZS, p.47) Jerry impales himself on the knife held in Peter's unwilling hand in an act that is a "fusion of sexuality and violence which has emerged as a mark of the urge to establish contact."[25]

In The Death of Bessie Smith, the arrival of a "nigger" at a "semiprivate white hospital," pleading for aid for Bessie Smith whose right arm is "almost torn off from her shoulder" (BS, p.76), is the culmination of a build-up of violence which serves as the force that disrupts the lives of the Nurse, the Intern, and the Orderly. These three dissatisfied people are forced by the events of the night to face the truth of their situations: the Nurse is a promiscuous woman whose claims of power have no validity; the Orderly does fit the Nurse's description of him as "a genuine little ass-licker" (BS, p. 46); and

the Intern is an ineffectual dreamer. All are "sick of everything in this hot, stupid, fly-ridden world" and all three "WANT OUT!" (BS, pp.70,71); they want release from their present situations. Jack's arrival at the hospital offers them an opportunity to escape the dehumanizing confines within which their society and their personal guilt and fear entrap them.

In The American Dream, the unexpected arrival of the Young Man at the apartment of Mommy and Daddy and the equally as unexpected departure of Grandma briefly disrupt the stasis of their lives. Grandma, even with all her obvious faults, represents a strength and forthrightness that the other characters lack, whereas the Young Man is the personification of dehumanization, alienation, and meaninglessness. However, for characters who are as completely out of touch with reality as Mommy and Daddy obviously are, even this abrupt, radical disordering of their lives is not sufficient to bring about any real awareness. Mommy's grief for her dead Mother dissipates as quickly and easily as it appeared when Mrs. Barker enters with the surprise of a new and more satisfactory bumble.

In contrast, the confrontation with reality forced on George and Martha, and peripherally on Nick and Honey, in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is nearly devastating. As in The Death of Bessie Smith, the violence that serves as the disruptive force builds throughout the play, culminating in the death of an unseen figure. This death of an imaginary, but quite important, child pushes the characters' defensive illusions "over the EDGE" (VW, p.237), bringing the characters to "the beginnings of a knowledge [they] cannot face" (VW, p.235) and then compelling them to face it. In the play Tiny Alice, the mysteries

and ambiguities build and compound until the three mysterious servants of Tiny Alice come to represent a disruptive force that finally is strong enough to cause Julian to examine his past response to reality. The Lawyer, the Butler, and Miss Alice first repeatedly urge him to "accept," to "have done with forgery, Julian; accept what's real." (TA, p.161) However, since Julian will not willingly face reality, the Lawyer shoots him in order to force him to remain with the model and Alice and an inevitable confrontation. As Julian lies dying, the heartbeats and the shadow of Alice ("truth") fill the stage, making his continued evasion impossible.

Similarly, the characters Tobias and Agnes in A Delicate Balance cannot avoid the confrontation when Harry and Edna, their best friends for forty years, unexpectedly and disruptively arrive at their house on Friday evening, initiating the trial of Tobias and Agnes to see if they will save themselves by helping their friends cope with their "terror" (DB, p.155):

> HARRY: We were scared. It was like being lost: very young again, with the dark, and lost. There was no . . . thing . . . to be . . . frightened of, but . . .
>
> ENDA: WE WERE FRIGHTENED . . . AND THERE WAS NOTHING. (DB, p.55)

Agnes clearly sees that the arrival of Harry and Edna is a radically disruptive force which threatens the balance of the family as it presently exists; she also sees that if they take in their friends, the family also must face the same awareness that drove their friends from their own home in fright. These friends bring "the terror. Or the plague--they're both the same." (DB, p.155) Agnes knows that confrontation with that "nothing" which frightened these friends may bring despair so devastating and debilitating that it will be comparable

in effect to the medieval plague, and she states that none of the family, with the possible exception of Claire, are immune to the "plague," having never before allowed themselves to be exposed to reality.

In Box-Mao-Box, the life of the persona of the poem narrated by the Old Woman is brutally disrupted by an emotional force, that is, the ultimate unkindness of her children. The Old Woman recites that she had "born up pretty well, an' wasn't much put down,/ Till Charley went to the poor-master, an' put me on the town." (Box, p.112) Similarly, the Long-Winded Lady is forced to confront reality momentarily following the death of her husband and her complete estrangement from her only child; obviously, she also had acknowledged that awareness of reality before she inexplicably fell over the railing of an ocean liner and into the ocean. In the play All Over, the tension accompanying the deathwatch by family and friends for a famous, powerful man gradually builds in intensity, disrupting the miserable, but stable, lives of the characters, forcing them to some sort of self-awareness.

In A Delicate Balance, Agnes explains the two ways of reacting to the force that brings about one's awareness of his existential situation, the two basic alternatives when confronted with the "plague":

> Let me tell you something about disease . . . mortal illness; you either are immune to it . . . or you fight [evade] it. If you are immune, you wade right in, you treat the patient until he either lives, or dies of it. But if you are not immune, you risk infection. (DB, p.156)

Immunity arises out of the ability to perceive and accept the facts about the senseless world in which all "the moral, religious, political, and social structures man has erected to 'illusion' himself have collapsed." The resulting total lack of imposed meaning in man's life allows one to "wade right in" and fight the senselessness and meaninglessness with one's self-commitment and compassionate action. On the

other hand, if one refuses to accept reality, he cannot ever develop "immunity," and his response to real or threatened infection is to "isolate," "quarantine," and "ostracize" (DB, p.156) through escape into various forms of refuge. The characters who choose this second response attempt to "burn [those carrying the plague] out, rid [them]-selves of it all . . . and wait for the next invasion." (DB, p.157)

Albee presents some characters who choose the first alternative, in the face of the plague, and thus attempt to develop permanent immunity. In each instance, the character or characters who do choose, or are compelled, to face reality go through a kind of symbolic purification or transcendence rite which is so disruptive that, unless it does act to effect "immunity" of the character, it may destroy him. In this process, the character is divested of all his old props and must begin to construct for himself a more valid life. The character in Albee's plays whose choice to "wade right in" is most obvious, and who must suffer the loss of social and professional status and great emotional strain, is the Intern in The Death of Bessie Smith. When Jack comes to the hospital and begs for help, the Intern consciously decides to risk "infection" and to act, despite the Nurse's threats and the Orderly's hesitation:

> JACK: Outside . . . in the car. . . . There was an accident . . . there is blood. . . . Her arm . . .
> INTERN: (After thinking for a moment, looking at the NURSE, moves toward the outside door) All right . . . we'll go see. (To the ORDERLY, who hangs back) Come on, you . . . let's go. (BS, p.73)

With this move, the Intern breaks free of his literal internment, that is, his detention and confinement within arbitrary, artificial social and moral boundaries, in what turns out to be a futile gesture of aid to a Negro woman. When the Intern re-enters the hospital, he

is covered with blood, the blood of a Negro woman, which represents his irrevocable involvement in the real world outside the sterile, white walls that have bound him. He no longer can block his awareness of the more immediate need of committed action through dreams of heroic participation in romanticized battles in faraway places. This first encounter with reality, revolt, and commitment affords the Intern no immediate, automatic hero-saint status; instead, he is assured only of losing his job and of possible reprisals by all those in power around him. More action and sacrifices will probably be required.

However, at the conclusion of The Death of Bessie Smith, the Intern has discovered the possibility of life in a realm beyond the life-denying system that feeds on the fear, guilt, and self-hatred of men and women, black and white alike. Henceforth, the Intern will no longer perpetuate the status quo by his refuge in dreams and his inaction. He chooses to change himself by changing his manner of reacting to reality, and through his action, implies that change is possible for all men, regardless of their situations:

> For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one that is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes it ought to be.[26]

The blood-covered Intern exits, leaving behind a black man and a white woman who refuse to make the requisite sacrifices and take the necessary risk of "infection." One must see the Intern's action as a positive move towards reality, unless one believes that a tangible gain is necessary for a gesture to having meaning; in that case, his actions appear only quixotic and pointless.

Similarly, in the play Tiny Alice, Julian also makes a positive move and finally, irrevocably, faces and admits the truth about reality.

He has resisted the confrontation as long as possible, but as he lies dying, propped against the model castle in an ironic crucifixion pose, Julian admits that he has "misunderstood" his life: "My time in the asylum? WAS THAT WHEN I WAS RATIONAL? THEN?" (TA, p.162) He admits that he has avoided "maturing" (TA, p.182), but he at last accepts reality: "IS THIS MY PRIESTHOOD, THEN? THIS WORLD?" (TA, p.182) Julian's final acceptance of "Alice" and the truth about reality is explained by C. W. E. Bigsby in the following way:

> Julian dies finally accepting a diminished universe and accepting a martyrdom that has nothing to do with Christ. He rejects the abstract in favor of the concretely human. . . . he finally confesses his faith in Alice, as opposed to some diffuse and distant God. . . . he understands now that "The first sign of manhood is a shedding of abstractions in an effort to press toward 'an intimate opening on to the reality of others.'"[27]

Comparably, the four characters in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? finally do face reality and attain the same "intimate opening on to the reality of others" following their Walpurgisnacht and exorcism rites, which could have killed them physically or spiritually if they did not work to save them. George and Martha admit to themselves and to Nick their physical sterility, which is merely a symbol for their fear concerning the absence of imposed meaning in the world:

> NICK: (To GEORGE; quietly) You couldn't have . . . any?
> GEORGE: We couldn't.
> MARTHA: (A hint of communion in this) We couldn't.

As the play ends, George and Martha have accepted the risk of "infection" and have gone beyond games to a more authentic level involving awareness, spontaneity, and intimacy. Their interaction, for the first time in the play, is honest and non-manipulative as they realize their desperate, mutual need for contact, compassion, and love.

The most ambiguous of these at least tentatively positive responses to reality is made by Peter at the end of The Zoo Story. Jerry's insistent words and behavior force Peter finally to face something more trying "than changing [his] cats' toilet box" (ZS, p.45); and Jerry apparently dies clinging to the belief that he has, as Albee insisted in an interview immediately following the first American production of the play, "pass[ed] on an awareness of life to the other character in the play."[28] Peter is inextricably forced into contact with another human being; however, as Michael Rutenberg suggests in his book Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest, Jerry's dying comfort, which is derived from his interpretation of "the effect of [his] actions" (ZS, p.33), may be unfounded:

> . . . [When] we are forcibly jolted out of our vegetable state by violence and are touched and possibly hurt, immediate uninvolvement must take place if we are to survive this onslaught. We must make a sudden and complete break with the experience. And in its place, at a safe distance from one another, [we must] create a more protective shielding future relationship.[29]

Peter does run away from the dying man at the conclusion of the play, and he may try to rebuild his barriers and to locate another "bench." In the same way, the Intern and George and Martha may also return to inauthenticity; but the return will now be more difficult because, as Camus explains in The Myth of Sisyphus, "A man is always prey to his truths. Once he has admitted them, he cannot free himself from them."[30]

However, in order to avoid the risk of possible "infection" by truth, other characters choose the second option described by Agnes and try to "burn out" the plague that threatens the stability of their lives and thus enable themselves to ignore it, until "the next invasion." In The Death of Bessie Smith, the Nurse's bitter cynicism affirms her cognizance of the inhumanity and degradation of the situation in which

she exists, but she will not act to oppose it. She has chosen to try to ignore it and is defeated. A hint of a compassionate human response appears in the Nurse during Jack's description of Bessie's crushed arm: "SHE WAS BLEEDING SO . . . !". The Nurse responds, "Like water from a faucet . . . ? Oh, that is terrible . . . terrible. . . ." (BS, p.76) Her reaction is caused by her recollection of the Intern's dream of revenge in which the Nurse gashes her arm and seeks aid from the Intern, but he merely watches her blood and her life flow away, "like water out of a faucet." (BS, p.67) For a moment, she acknowledges to Jack the common vulnerability of all people; however, the Nurse has achieved such complete mental withdrawal that her moment of awareness and empathy cannot be sustained long enough to compel her to act. The Orderly talks about the lack of proportion in society and longs for action, but he too refuses to act.

Similarly, Mommy and Daddy do not choose to act to change their lives; the play ends when "everybody's got what he thinks he wants." (AD, p.127) Only Grandma chooses to see the American Dream for what it has in fact become, and she chooses to step outside the situation in an act which confirms the viability of dissent on a personal level. In the play Box-Mao-Box, the voice from the box speaks of a billion black birds, like a "black net skimming the ocean" (Box, p.24), with "just one . . . moving beneath . . . in the opposite way" (Box, p.29), which suggests the remaining possibility of action to counteract the general movement toward death. There is still hope as long as even one in a billion will willingly choose to move in a different direction. However, none of the characters in this play are shown to choose to respond honestly to reality, even in the face of their great disruptions

in their lives. Like the Nurse, the Orderly, Mommy, and Daddy, these characters also choose to isolate, quarantine, and ostracize rather than accept reality.

In this choice of response there is the danger, which is mentioned by the Voice from the box, that there is a point in the process of withdrawal after which the possibility of choosing to react honestly to life is lost: "Once it starts--gets to a certain point--the momentum is too much." (Box, p.22) Characters must face the fact that an abdication of responsibility for oneself and others and the retreat into various refuges is an abrogation of one's humanity, and, as George explains in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, "there are limits. I mean man can put up with only so much without he descends a rung or two on the old evolutionary ladder [. . .] and it's a funny ladder . . . you can't reverse yourself . . . start back up once you're descending." (VW, p.51) The words of Tobias in A Delicate Balance add even further emphasis to this idea:

> Once you drop . . . you can come back up part way . . . but never . . . really back again. Always . . . descent. (DB, p.33)

Unless one acts directly to counteract the trend, time and age will almost inevitably make a person progressively less willing and able to effect changes. The human inclination to passivity can become so deeply ingrained that one finally is incapable of action. As Agnes asserts in A Delicate Balance, unless one acts to counteract the trend, separation from other people "is taken care of" by time:

> [. . .] the gradual . . . demise of intensity, the private preoccupations, the substitutions. We become allegorical [. . .] as we grow older. (DB, p.90)

This simplification of people's lives as they grow older can result, as Miss Alice warns, merely "from emptying [them]selves" and becoming only the roles that they play and not, as it should, "from understanding and acceptance." (TA, p.111)

As the routine and the pattern of one's life become progressively more apparent and predictable with the passage of time, other people begin to depend on those patterns in order to maintain the order of their own lives, and they resist disruptions and changes in the lives of those around them almost as strongly as they resist change in their own lives. Claire explains this resistance: "We have our friends and guests for patterns, don't we--known quantities." (DB, p.150)

In the play A Delicate Balance, the danger inherent in waiting too long before confronting reality and choosing to act is most poignantly apparent in the plight of Tobias. As a young man, Tobias had the cat killed that tried to force him to re-evaluate a relationship by behaving in a way that disturbed the usual balance in their existence together. With great guilt and anguish he recalls and retells that story early in the play; and when he is given a second chance at honesty, with the arrival of Harry and Edna and the plague, he determines this time to wear the hair shirt and do the penance (DB, p.46), or, in Agnes's words, "to wade right in . . . [and] treat the patient until he either lives, or dies of [the plague]," a response which he had rejected more than a quarter of a century earlier. He chooses to make this response because he finally sees that his friendships, his marriage, and his life have "all been empty." (DB, p.156)

In spite of all the strong forces that serve to counteract his decision, Tobias finally chooses to try to act to change his relationship

to other people and reality. But it simply is too late. He has waited too long:

> Time. Time happens [. . .] . To people. Everything becomes . . . too late, finally. You know it's going on . . . up on the hill; you can see the dust, and hear the cries, and the steel . . . but you wait; and time happens. When you do go, sword, shield . . . finally . . . there's nothing there . . . save rust; bones; and the wind. (DB, p.169)

Despite Tobias's pleas, Harry and Edna refuse to stay with their friends and try to establish an honest, open relationship based on love and compassion. Instead, all will be as before. The friends arrived at Tobias's house Friday night and leave as the sun rises Sunday morning, which brings an ironic resurrection of the characters to their old lives. The four characters Tobias, Agnes, Claire, and Julia begin the day, but they are now irrevocably damned to their inauthentic existences because it is now "too late, or something" (DB, p.78), to do anything to effect changes.

In his most recent play, All Over, Albee even more pointedly warns against man's delay. The play picks up on the sick-Daddy image that has recurred throughout the plays, as the Husband--once a strong, powerful, self-reliant man--lies dying. As the Wife explains, he had been hooked up to machines in the hospital which sustained his existence, but merely as a living organism with minimal communication and interaction with other human beings. He chose to disconnect himself from the life-sustaining machines. Formerly a virile, strong man, he does not want to stay alive if he cannot truly live--working, acting, and creating meaning in his own life. He decides to "end the line" for himself before any further dehumanization and degradation can result. However, his death appears to "end the line" for the other characters as well, whose total dependency on the Husband is emphasized by their

designations as the Wife, the Mistress, the Best Friend, the Son, and the Daughter--designations that are based solely on the relationship of the people to the one central figure, the Husband.

It appears from the play that long ago all the other characters confronted reality and chose to retreat. Now they are old; the average age of the characters, as noted earlier, is sixty-five years old. The older generation, represented by the Wife, Mistress, Best Friend, Doctor, and Nurse, appear to be incapable of change. And the children are not strong human beings: they cannot act decisively; they cannot produce children; and they are unable to feel or accept love. The very old Doctor in the play briefly mentions the black plague and the fact that "saddling up and running" from it in the past had only postponed one's confrontation with it but had not really helped one permanently avoid it; so the doctors stayed in the towns and fought the disease, and "when eighty percent of a town would go, wiped out in a week, the doctors, such as they were, would lose only half." (AO, p.99) However, the others do not want to hear and understand his words:

> THE DOCTOR: The priests had the same break as the doctors, the same percentages. Might mean something; probably not. (Pause) Want some more history?
> THE WIFE: (Shakes her head, smiles a little) No.
> THE MISTRESS: (Ibid.) Not really. (AO, p.99)

The characters in All Over have delayed too long to try to save themselves from absurdity; thus, the imminent death of the Husband does not result in unification of the characters in their common grief, loneliness, and loss, unification which would provide them with at least momentary contact. Instead, the situation precipitates the Wife's hard, merciless announcement, person by person: "I don't love

you." (AO, p.108) Since the characters' only hope lies in accepting reality, admitting their mutual need, and creating an ethic of compassionate love, the Wife's words constitute an admission of ultimate defeat:

> All we've done . . . is think about ourselves. There's no help for the dying, I suppose. Oh my; the burden. What will become of me and me and me. Well, we're the ones have got to go on. Selfless love? I don't think so; we love to be loved, and when it's taken away . . . then why not rage . . . or pule. (AO, p.109)

The conclusion of this play is the least ambiguous of any in Albee's work. For these loveless, self-entrapped characters who have waited far too long for action to be possible, the death of the Husband means that it really is "all over."

Indeed, there is an obvious progression of emphasis on death throughout Albee's plays, because death is, of course, the ultimate escape. In All Over, the deathwatch for the Husband, which is the unifying image of the play, suggests the spiritual death of all the other characters in the play who have meaning in life only through the Husband's influence. Even in this relatively negative play, however, the emphasis remains on the responsibility of man in creating his own negative situation. From The Zoo Story to All Over, Albee's plays indicate that spiritual and moral death and alienation are not inevitable aspects of the human condition; instead, they result from man's inauthentic response to reality. His plays demonstrate that human relationships are unsatisfactory not because of the ineluctable separateness of man or the innately contradictory nature of sexual attraction, but because of the failure of human beings to face the facts of their individual realities and to see that self-honesty, a sense of responsibility for oneself and others, compassion, and selfless love--all leading one to committed action--can furnish meaning in "the senseless world that makes no sense."

In Albee's plays, any kind of retreat from confrontation with reality suggests "sickness": the acceptance of the myth of the American Dream demonstrates the sickness of American society; the creation of the fantasy son by George and Martha confirms and emphasizes their psychological and physical sterility; in The Death of Bessie Smith, the ostensible necessity of the characters' compensatory illusions points up the corruption and stagnation of their society; and in Tiny Alice, the illusion of the woman in the asylum that she is pregnant with the son of God is based, in reality, on her fatal cancer of the womb.

All Albee's plays imply that if man is crushed, emasculated, and subdued, it is not simply an inevitable result of his environment or heredity (as is the case with the protagonist in a naturalistic work), nor is it due to the fact of the indifferent, senseless universe (as is the case with the anti-heroes in works by playwrights such as Beckett and Ionesco). Instead, it is the result of man's own capitulation, whether through conscious choice or through passivity. Finally, one must accept the accuracy of C. W. E. Bigsby's evaluation of man as seen in Albee's plays:

> He is a self-created victim adrift in a society which has carefully constructed its own absurdity from the bricks and mortar of spiritual despair and material cupidity.[31]

Conclusion

Following an examination and analysis of the theatrical elements, characterization, language, and thematic concerns of Edward Albee's drama, it is apparent that the terms that recur most persistently in the discussions of the plays are those which denote some kind of dissonance: parody, paradox, contrast, incongruity, discrepency, and ironic juxtaposition. Gilbert Debusscher acknowledges this fact in his assertion that Albee has developed a disquieting but effective theatric style, "with his disconcerting mixture of minute observation, precise details, and wild invention; with his fusion of reality and daydream; with his combination of life and game, of existence and theatre."[1]

Through his skillful use of manipulation, distortion, reversal, and transmutation in every aspect of his plays, Albee achieves a nearly perfect synthesis of form and content. The plays depict the dissonance that exists in modern society in a way that creates tension in the minds of the audience. Albee's unpredictable use of conventional elements of drama parallels the unpredictability of his hypotheses and conclusions when considering conventional subject matter and traditional themes. And in all instances, the result is the same; dissonance is created in the mind of the audience member, dissonance which is sufficiently strong to stimulate introspective analysis and, it is hoped, a restructuring of one's perceptions, information, and opinions, which may eventually result in new ideas and increased awareness.

Because of the synthesis that he achieves, one may ultimately conclude that Albee's plays, to an extent, "are" what they are "about," thus creating the strongest kind of organic unity. For example, indirection, fragmentation, and entrapment characterize all aspects of the play The Zoo Story, including the tone, plot, language, and theme. Just as Jerry does go, both physically and verbally, "a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly" (ZS, p. 21) in his interaction with Peter, so the meaning of the play is made clear to the audience member through comparable indirection. "The Story of Jerry and the Dog," which Jerry narrates, is a parable from which Peter is meant to learn, just as the entire play is meant to function as a dramatic parable for the audience member. Similar organic unity exists in other of Albee's plays. In The Sandbox and The American Dream, for example, one of the main subjects of concern is the absurdity, inanity, and cruelty of contemporary American life. In these two plays, most of the characters are cruel, inane, and preposterous; their dialogue is clichéd and meaningless; the action of the plays is preposterous and disjointed. Every facet of the plays emphasizes the idea of absurdity. In the same way, repetition, frustration, and stagnation are words that apply to the tone, action, dialogue, and themes of the plays The Death of Bessie Smith, A Delicate Balance, and All Over. In the last two of these plays, the artificiality and elaborateness of the characters' dialogue parallel and emphasize the general sense in the plays of emptiness covered by a glittering facade. These two plays, A Delicate Balance and All Over, present a multi-leveled demonstration, a discussion, and an implicit condemnation of the substitution of form for substance in life. In the play Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, the one adjective "violent" can be applied to the tone, action, and language of

the play. Much of the dialogue of the play consists of the characters' narration of stories that fit George's description of one of his stories: "Well, it's an allegory, really--probably--but it can be read as straight cozy prose [. . .] ." (VW, p. 142) Indeed, the whole play fits the same description.

In Tiny Alice, the inter-relationship and synthesis of all the elements of drama are even more evident. The characters' speech frequently is ambiguous and open to interpretation on several levels. Three of the major characters--Miss Alice, the Lawyer, and the Butler--are equally as ambiguous, appearing to exist both on a real and a supernatural level. Sexual allusions, puns, and imagery pervade the language of the play, and the structure of the play is comparable to the pattern of sexual excitation, climax, and release. As Lee Baxandall explains, "Tiny Alice has the logic peculiar to sexual revery; it is compulsive, ambiguous, and obsessive in its events as well as in its language."[2] Julian's descriptions of his earlier dreams about death as a martyr--"And there is a wound in me, the warm dark flow . . . runs down my belly . . . to . . . bathing my groin" (TA, p. 122)--are mirrored in the events that lead to Julian's actual death at the end of the play, as he is shot in the stomach by the Lawyer and the blood flows from his wound. Furthermore, the play itself may be seen as a monodrama, existing entirely within Julian's head, like an hallucination; his experiences with the Lawyer, the Butler, and Miss Alice in the strange castle where inexplicable things occur may be another of his recurrent hallucinations. His hallucinations in the past have been no less bizarre. And it appears that, as with his earlier hallucinations, Julian will never be sure if the things he has experienced are only on the level of a dream that is vividly recalled or if they have existence in reality.

Miss Alice suggests the complexities of this situation in her question to Julian: "Is the memory of something having happened the same as it having happened?" (TA, p.64) Unequivocally, the same terms may be used to describe the tone, action, characterization, language, and themes of this play: mystery, bewilderment, confusion, and a lack of surety and absolute knowledge.

With comparable effectiveness, the technical elements of the play Box-Mao-Box parallel and emphasize the thematic concerns of the play. The structure of the play is based on counterpoint and repetition. The three main characters, through their language and concerns, come to represent three diverse but equally inane and inauthentic responses to the senselessness of the world. The characters' monotonous, alternating, ostensibly unrelated speeches create a repetitious, contrapuntal effect that is disturbing and dissonant. The play becomes art that "hurts," and, according to the disembodied voice that speaks from the Box, "When art hurts. [. . .] Then the corruption is complete." (Box, p.28) The play thus becomes the things which it is meant to warn against; Box-Mao-Box, like other of Albee's plays, "becomes" what it is "about."

This synthesis of form and content recurs throughout Albee's plays, and there are other recurring elements in his plays. For example, arising out of Albee's consistent emphasis on three major thematic concerns, a particular pattern of action emerges from his plays. In each play, from The Zoo Story through All Over, Albee first presents a diagnostic portrait of the unhappy condition of modern man, who has tried to avoid having to perceive, acknowledge, and cope with his "senseless position in a world that makes no sense." Man attempts

evasion through diverse forms of retreat: emotional withdrawal and passivity, promiscuity, intoxication, insanity, material acquisitiveness, religious absolutism, the development of elaborate verbal games, submersion in dreams and illusions, and so on. However, these elaborate methods of evasion are seen only to increase the unhappiness of the characters and thereby demonstrate the accuracy of Agnes's observation in A Delicate Balance: "Do we dislike happiness? We manufacture such a portion of our own despair [. . .] ." (DB, p.132) Something happens in each of the plays that radically disrupts the delicate balance that the person has achieved and maintained whereby he has been able to exist in the "dark sadness" without having to confront reality; some person, event, or situation that is too disruptive to be ignored upsets the balance, at least momentarily. Simultaneously, there is a gradual increase in verbal and physical violence, which reaches a climax of destruction resulting in a literal or symbolic death.

The disruption and death create a situation in which the characters are given an opportunity to choose new ways of responding to their situations, but the characters consistently choose either of two ways of reacting. They choose either to retreat even further into their inauthentic states of existence, or they choose to act, thereby facing the reality of the absurd world and of their own total freedom and responsibility and stepping outside their old entrapments. However, Albee provides no unambiguous, conclusive endings to his plays, even when a "happy ending" is possible. The audience member may see a character as he takes the initial step out of one particular morass, but there is no absolute assurance provided in the plays that the character will go on to create a meaningful life for himself. For

instance, the ultimate effect of Jerry's death on Peter's life is left unclear. The fates of the Intern, Martha and George, and Nick and Honey also remain equivocal.

The tentative hopefulness of all the plays is unequivocal, however. Even in plays such as A Delicate Balance, Box-Mao-Box, and All Over, in which no character effectively acts to change his life, the final effect of the plays is not nihilistic. Albee vividly depicts the worst possible situations for mankind for a positive reason, that is, in order to warn man against waiting too long to attempt change. Negative depictions can be used for positive effect, and one can easily see the validity of C. W. E. Bigsby's explanation of the preponderance of negative depictions of people, relationships, and society in Albee's plays:

> Where society is attacked, where bourgeois standards are ridiculed and where the fierce undercurrents of personal relationships are critically examined this is essentially an aspect of an affirmative response to the situation.[3]

As Albee explained in an interview, it is one of the prime responsibilities of a playwright "to show people how they are and what their time is like in the hope that perhaps they'll change it."[4]

All Albee's plays also follow one other pattern by clearly demonstrating that he is not in revolt against the senselessness of the world, but against the dishonest, demeaning attitudes that men sometimes assume when faced with the human condition. The first type of revolt is inherently nihilistic because it is inevitably ineffectual; the second deals with the only part of the human condition in a senseless world over which man can ever hope to have any control--himself.

All these patterns--in the action, in the thematic concerns, in the synthesis of form and structure, in the tentative hopefulness of the

conclusions, and in the pervasive dissonance created by the plays--arise out of Albee's choice of responses to the situation in which he, along with other post-World War Two American playwrights, is placed. Because he is equally a product of his time and of his national heritage, Edward Albee must work both with the Absurd conception of the world and with the attributes and attitudes associated with the American dramatic tradition. From the American tradition, he takes the faith in man's adaptability and ability to combat and overcome obstacles; but he rejects any facile optimism. He shows the traditional American concern for reformable social issues such as the perversion of the founding principles of the country, racial injustice, materialism, decadence, and so on. His plays impugn the whole problematic texture of affluent America, with its passive conformity, materialistic values, and pragmatic standards of morality. But he rejects the traditional, unambiguous, conscience-assuaging resolutions that have been demanded of popular American plays. These plays embody the fault, which George Bernard Shaw pointed out in the work of Pinero, of having "no idea beyond that of doing something daring and bringing down the house by running away from the consequences."[5]

In contrast, Albee follows the logic of the action of his plays to more realistic, and consequently less conclusive, conclusions. In fact, it is impossible to predict with any assurance the outcome of Albee's plays. Since he creates no one-dimensional heroes or villains, there can be no straightforward conflicts in which "good" will inevitably conquer. In the place of pragmatic, optimistic, unambiguous, and facile conclusions, Albee's plays end with dissonance and provocative questions.

In a comparable way, while Albee adopts many innovative stage techniques from the Theatre of the Absurd, he simultaneously rejects their cynical despair and nihilistic conclusions. Albee's plays demonstrate his concern with those subjects considered by the writers of the Theatre of the Absurd--human abandonment and isolation, the devaluation of language and the resultant lack of communication, the press of time and objects on man, and man's disinclination to separate illusion and reality. However, his plays arrive at dramatic conclusions that are, as indicated earlier, tentatively hopeful and therefore unlike those found among writers of the Absurd. Instead, Albee's plays function as modern parables, suggesting very general moral admonitions: Man should admit the truth of his problematic situation in an absurd world and not take refuge in dishonest, diversionary responses. Man should commit himself to perception and acceptance of reality, to other people, and to a defense of his own humanity, even though unusual personal sacrifices may be required and even though he cannot be assured of success. The real world may be smaller, less orderly, and less secure than the world of one's illusions and dreams, but at least by living in the real world one can make contact with other real people who can help one find some consolation and some happiness. From the first play, The Zoo Story, to the last play, All Over, one can see that Albee's drama consistently is intended to stimulate human beings not to despair but to confront and accept "the apocalyptic vision of the human situation."[6]

As in all the other instances of dissonance as method in his plays, Albee's combination and manipulation of attributes of both the American and the Absurd dramatic traditions work to stimulate tension

and a desire for resolution of that tension in the minds of the audience. However, this level of dissonance may be the most difficult to resolve because, according to Gerald Weales, the incongruity of Albee's allegiance to two very diverse philosophical positions is not yet resolved in the playwright's mind--which is reflected in his work:

> Albee, then, shares with most American playwrights an idea of the utility of art, the supposition not only that art should convey truth, but that it should do so to some purpose. There is a strong strain of didacticism in all his work, but it is balanced by a certain ambiguity about the nature of the instructive fable. . . . [I]t may be his way of recognizing that there is a conflict between his [Absurdist] attitude towards man's situation and his suspicion (or hope: certainly <u>conviction</u> is too strong a word) that something can, or ought, to be done about it; between his assumption that this is hell we live in and his longing to redecorate it.[7]

Nonetheless, this example of unavoidable dissonance, regardless of its complexity, ultimately functions in the same way as all the other examples in which Albee deliberately uses dissonance as dramatic method. Dissonance, however it is created, must be resolved. At one extreme, a person can passively forget or suppress the stimuli that created the tension, thus reducing the dissonance. At the other extreme, a person can be activated to thought and a re-examination of his ideas. Therefore, it is possible that Albee's plays, in which dissonance is the predominant method, can function as objects for reflection for the audience member, who learns from the plays because of the increased awareness which the plays stimulate.

Albee's drama presents images and symbols of crucial contemporary problems which are both personal and social, political and moral, and immediate and universal. Using his eclectic, disquieting style--in which dissonance is method--Albee goes beyond dogmatic, unambiguous social comment, beyond unexamined optimism, and beyond Absurdist

fatalism to explore the complex causes and implications of modern man's real state of social and moral depletion. And, as Anne Paolucci states, this refusal by Albee to accept the obvious and the simplistic --in either style or content--is simultaneously responsible for both the apparent weaknesses and the very real strengths of his plays:

> . . . if his originality has not been properly appreciated, it is because American audiences have not been properly trained to recognize either the new idiom or the pessimistic conclusion it tries to articulate. I do not suggest that the burden of dramatic communication lies with the audience; but an audience trained in humanitarian platitudes is not prepared to make the minimal effort required. The difficulty of the content must be accepted before one can begin to appreciate the extraordinary appropriateness of the way it has been portrayed on the stage.[8]

Albee's extraordinarily appropriate method involves dissonance and indirection. The difficult content that Albee effectively presents is the awareness that individuals can and must change before it is too late for change to be possible. From The Zoo Story to All Over, Albee's plays consistently suggest, despite the apparent hopelessness of man's situation in a "senseless world that makes no sense," that a realistic solution should be sought and that an affirmative response to life is possible.

NOTES

Introduction

1. Edward Albee, "Introduction," Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, p. 9. All references to Edward Albee's plays are to the following editions and hereafter will be documented parenthetically in the text, according to the following abbreviations: ZS, The Zoo Story (New York: Signet, 1961); SB, The Sandbox (New York: Signet, 1964); BS, The Death of Bessie Smith (New York: Signet, 1964); AD, The American Dream (New York: Signet, 1961); VW, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (New York: Pocket Books, 1963); TA, Tiny Alice (New York: Pocket Books, 1966); DB, A Delicate Balance (New York: Pocket Books, 1968); Box, Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, also referred to in the text as Box-Mao-Box (New York: Pocket Books, 1970); AO, All Over (New York: Atheneum, 1971).

2. Gerald Weales, The Jumping-off Place: American Drama in the 1960's, p. 24.

3. Mel Gussow, "Albee: Odd Man in on Broadway," Newsweek, 61 (4 February 1963), 49.

4. Edward Albee, "Which Theatre Is the Absurd One?" in American Playwrights on Drama, ed. Horst Frenz, p.172.

5. Gussow, p. 49.

6. Albee, p.172.

7. Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, pp.267-68.

8. C. W. E. Bigsby, Albee, p.21.

9. Anne Paolucci, From Tension to Tonic: The Plays of Edward Albee, p. 4.

10. Geri Trotta, "On Stage: Edward Albee," Horizon, 4, No.1 (1961), 79.

11. Since Albee frequently uses ellipsis marks within the dialogue of his plays to indicate hesitancy on the part of a speaker, I shall indicate my own ellipsis marks, which indicate deletions from the text, by enclosing them within brackets.

12. Paolucci, p. 12.

13. William A. Watts, "Predictability and Pleasure: Reactions to the Disconfirmation of Expectancies," in Theories of Cognitive Consistency: A Sourcebook, p.469.

14. Jane Hardyck and Marcelle Kardush, "A Modest Modish Model for Dissonance Reduction," in Theories of Cognitive Consistency: A Sourcebook, p.685.

15. Hardyck and Kardush, p.685.

16. Hardyck and Kardush, p.686.

17. Michael E. Rutenberg, Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest, p.200.

Chapter One: Staging

1. Paolucci, p.5.

2. Gilbert Debusscher, Edward Albee: Tradition and Renewal, p.8.

3. Bigsby, Albee, p.29.

4. Quoted by Alan Schneider in Richard Schechner's "Reality Is Not Enough: An Interview with Alan Scheider," Tulane Drama Review, 9, No.3 (1965), 146.

5. Bigsby, Albee, p.48.

6. Ruby Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama, see Endnote Nine for Chapter Five, "The Verbal Murders of Edward Albee," p.323.

7. Walter Kerr, "The Theatre: Albee's A Delicate Balance," New York Theatre Critics' Reviews, 1966, 27 (1966), 294.

8. Paolucci, pp.7-8.

9. Quoted by Ruby Cohn, Edward Albee, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No.77, p.26.

10. Robert Brustein, "Three Plays and a Protest," in Seasons of Discontent: Dramatic Opinions 1959-1965, p.308.

11. Quoted by Lee Baxandall, "The Theatre of Edward Albee," Tulane Drama Review, 9, No.4 (1965), 36.

12. Bigsby, Albee, p.56.

13. Paolucci, p.27.

14. George Wellwarth, The Theatre of Protest and Paradox: Developments in the Avant-Garde Drama, revised edition, p.335.

15. Ruby Cohn, "Albee's Box and Ours," Modern Drama, 14 (1971), 138.

16. Paolucci, p.124.

17. Gerald Weales, The Jumping off Place: American Drama in the 1960's, p.51.

18. Weales, p.51.

Chapter Two: Characterization

1. Bigsby, Albee, p.100.

2. Debusscher, p.28.

3. Quoted by Wellwarth, p.324.

4. Baxandall, p.26.

5. Rose Zimbardo, "Symbolism and Naturalism in Edward Albee's The Zoo Story," Twentieth Century Literature, 8 (1962), 14.

6. Zimbardo, p.14.

7. Zimbardo, p.15.

8. Paul Witherington, "Albee's Gothic: The Resonances of Cliché," Comparative Drama, 4 (1970), 158.

9. Quoted by Rutenberg, p.212.

10. Cohn, Edward Albee, p.110.

11. Henry Hewes, "Broadway Postscript: The Tiny Alice Caper," Saturday Review, 48, 30 January 1965, 38.

12. D. C. Coleman, "Fun and Games: Two Pictures of Heartbreak House," Drama Survey, 5 (Winter 1966-67), 224.

13. Coleman, p.224.

14. Cohn, Edward Albee, p.42.

15. The term "Tiny Alice" apparently is a slang term in homosexual jargon for "tight anus." Albee has denied that he knew this "arcane information" in an interview with Michael Rutenberg in Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest, p.234. Albee furthermore denied that he intended any sort of pun when he chose the term "Tiny Alice" as the title of his play. Nonetheless, several critics have analyzed the play in homosexual terms. Specifically, Phillip Roth's review of Tiny Alice entitled "The Play That Dare Not Speak Its Name," in the New York Review of Books, 4, 25 February 1965, 4, is based entirely on his interpretation of Tiny Alice as a defense of homosexuality.

16. William F. Lucey, "Albee's Tiny Alice: Truth and Appearance," Renascence, 21 (Winter 1969), 77.

17. Bigsby, Albee, p.64.

18. Paolucci, p.47.

19. Eric Berne, Games People Play, p.184.

20. Berne, p.41.

21. For a more complete analysis of the specific games played by the characters, see Joy Flasch, "Games People Play in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," Modern Drama, 10 (1967), 280-88.

22. Berne, p.184.

23. Baxandall, p.20.

24. Paolucci, p.33.

25. Harold Clurman, "Theatre," Nation, 192, 18 March 1961, 242.

26. Paolucci, p.17.

Chapter Three: Language

1. Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama, p.168.

2. Paolucci, p.16.

3. Arthur K. Oberg, "Edward Albee: His Language and Imagination," Prairie Schooner, 40, No.2 (1966), 142.

4. Oberg, p.143.

5. Oberg, p.142.

6. Daniel R. Brown, "Albee's Targets," Satire Newsletter, 6 (Spring 1969), 47.

7. Harold Clurman, "Theatre," Nation, 206, 25 March 1968, 420.

8. Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama, p.164.

9. Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama, p.165.

10. Michael Murray, "The Stage: Albee's Endgame," Commonweal, 44, 23 April 1971, 166.

11. Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama, p.134.

12. Paul Witherington, "Language of Movement in Albee's The Death of Bessie Smith," Twentieth Century Literature, 13 (1967), 84.

13. Witherington, "Language of Movement," p.87.

14. Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama, p.144.

15. Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama, pp.144-45.

16. Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama, p.160.

17. Quoted by Harold Clurman, "Theatre," Nation, 209, 27 October 1969, 451.

18. Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama, p.166.

19. Bigsby, Albee, p.50.

20. Oberg, p.141.

Chapter Four: Theme

1. Allan Lewis, American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre, p.82.

2. Richard Amacher, Edward Albee, p.168.

3. Debusscher, pp.82-83.

4. Richard Kostelanetz, The New American Arts, p.61.

5. Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt, p.26.

6. Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt, p.32.

7. Quoted by Digby Diehl, "Edward Albee Interviewed," Transatlantic Review, 13 (Summer 1963), 72.

8. Alan Schneider, "Why So Afraid?" Tulane Drama Review, 7, No.3 (1963), 11.

9. Albee, "Which Theatre Is the Absurd One?" p.170.

10. Arnold Hinchcliffe, The Absurd, p.11.

11. Esslin, pp.352,353.

12. Eugene Ionesco, quoted by Esslin, p.5.

13. Brustein, The Threatre of Revolt, p.28.

14. Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, p.29.

15. C. W. E. Bigsby, Confrontation and Commitment, p.81.

16. Esslin, p.377.

17. Baxandall, p.26.

18. Bigsby, Albee, p.58.

19. Bigsby, Confrontation and Commitment, p.87.

20. Jordan Y. Miller, "Myth and the American Dream: O'Neill to Albee," Modern Drama, 7 (1964), 190.

21. Daniel J. Boorstein, The Image: Or What Happened to the American Dream, p.31.

22. Miller, p.190.

23. Henry Knepler, "Edward Albee: Conflict of Tradition," Modern Drama, 10 (1967), 275.

24. Bigsby, Albee, p.46.

25. Bigsby, Confrontation and Commitment, p.74.

26. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," in Existentialism from Doestoevsky to Sartre, ed. Walter Kaufmann, p.291.

27. Bigsby, Confrontation and Commitment, pp.88-89.

28. Quoted by Rutenberg, p.16.

29. Rutenberg, pp.36-37.

30. Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. Justin O'Brien, p.24.

31. Bigsby, Albee, p.111.

Conclusion

1. Debusscher, p.84.

2. Baxandall, p.34.

3. Bigsby, Confrontation and Commitment, p.20.

4. Quoted by R. S. Stewart, "John Gielgud and Edward Albee Talk About the Theatre," Atlantic, 215, No.4 (1965), 62.

5. Quoted by John Gassner, Theatre at the Crossroads, p.214.

6. Bigsby, Confrontation and Commitment, p.22.

7. Weales, p.35.

8. Paolucci, pp.5-6.

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